

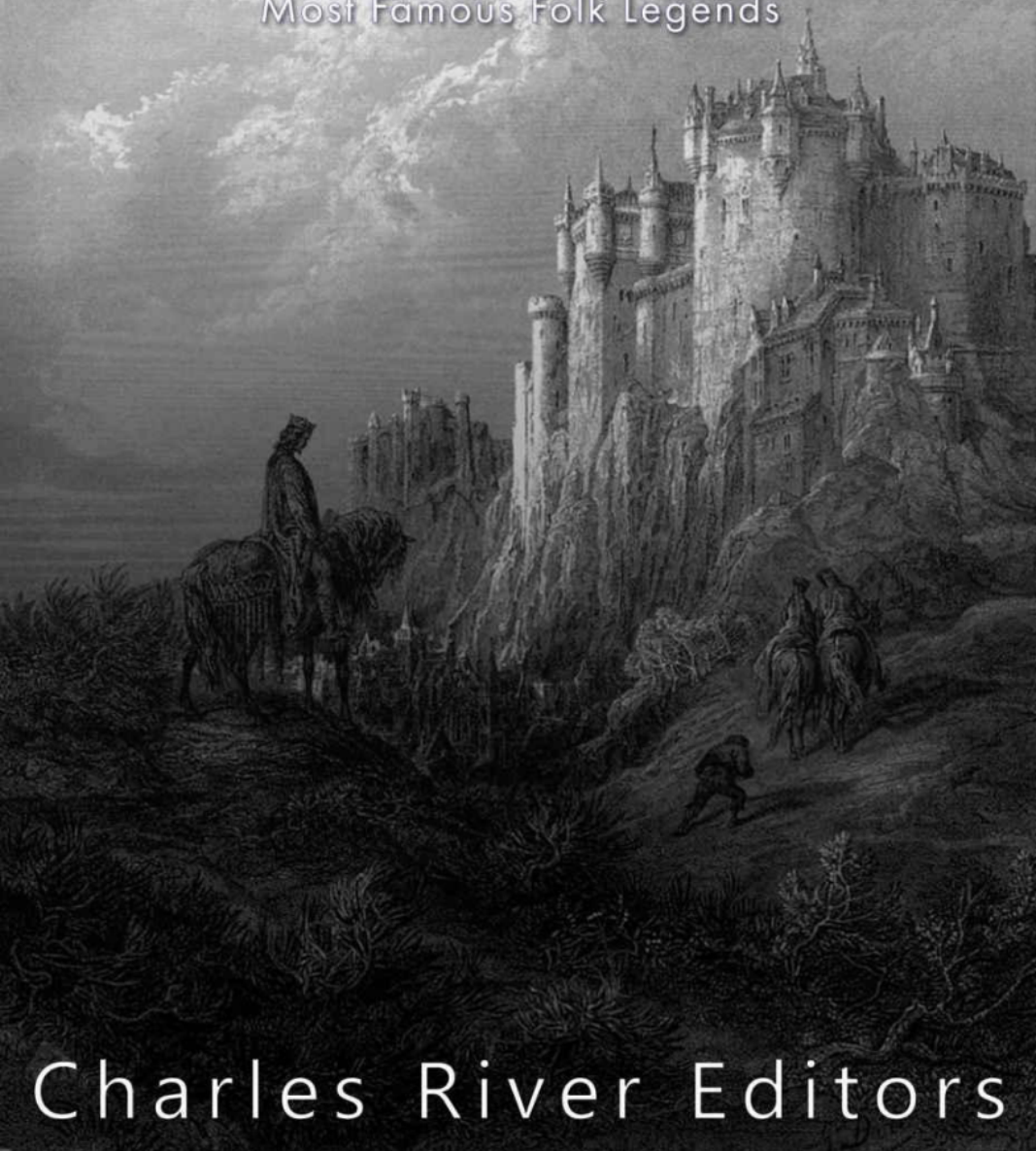


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King Arthur and Robin Hood

The History and Folklore of England's
Most Famous Folk Legends



Charles River Editors

King Arthur and Robin Hood: The History and Folklore of England's Most Famous Folk Legends

By Jesse Harasta and Charles River Editors



14th century tapestry depicting King Arthur

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Introduction



Howard Pyle's illustration of King Arthur

King Arthur

King Arthur is one of the most famous names in history, and his name still evokes visions of fantasy, chivalry, bravery, and more even today. Arthur remains a pop culture fixture around the globe, made famous in various Arthurian tales written by writers like Chretien de Troyes. Arthur came to embody the ideals of the Middle Ages: strength, chivalry, bravery, and more. Along the way, his Excalibur sword, the Holy Grail, his queen, and more have all become household words.

Arthur has long been identified as a folk hero, and there are countless tales that comprise the Arthurian legend, but was there an actual person that the original stories were based on? People still

search for the seeds of truth in the Knights of the Round Table, and the historical figure that inspired the Arthurian tales.

Of course, as with all great myths, and even those with a kernel of truth behind them, there is no "real" Arthur. Arthur is now comprised of the works written by diverse storytellers, most of which have built upon the ancient stories and possibly history. It is from there that a primordial seed of myth remains at the heart of all the retellings. At the same time, Arthur's story is one of transformation, as he is brought from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and more modern times. And that story also includes the famous contemporaries in his stories and other important historical figures, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, the imprisoned Sir Thomas Mallory and Walt Disney.

When looking for the historical and mythical Arthur, scholars try to understand how the Arthur of these tales and of others like Disney's *Sword in the Stone* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* came to be. What are the origins of the Arthur legend and what can they tell people about the past? What is the historical basis for King Arthur, if any?

Robin Hood



19th century illustration of Robin Hood and Marian

“Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen

Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his band of men

Feared by the bad, loved by the good

Robin Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Hood.” - Theme Song from The Adventures of Robin Hood

There are few characters in the English language more iconic than Robin Hood. Emerging out of the ballads of the High Middle Ages and surviving through numerous permutations to the present day, the green-clad archer has become an icon. Today he represents a playful, irreverent and cunning resistance to corruption and injustice, associated primarily with stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Robin Hood’s selfless acts of helping the masses at the expense of himself (by not keeping his treasure) have led to contemporary figures like Bill Gates being called “Modern Day Robin Hoods”, and

when a British man robbed a bank in 2013 and handed out the money to homeless people before he was arrested and imprisoned, the name Robin Hood was naturally in the news once more.

Robin Hood is a celebrated folk hero and a kind of good thief, but the earliest stories about Robin Hood depict a far different character. The first Robin Hood was often a brutal and selfish yet also honorable figure, an anti-hero loved (perhaps paradoxically) by many social classes and loathed by authorities. When the notorious Gunpowder Plot was discovered at the beginning of the 17th century, the Earl of Salisbury condemned Guy Fawkes and the conspirators for being “Robin Hoods”.

The transformation of Robin Hood over the centuries has left many scholars attempting to find the origins behind the original story. Like King Arthur, some have even sought a historical figure that might serve as the basis for Robin Hood, while others have sought out mythological origins to see if Robin Hood’s character evolved out of a mythological figure. When looking for the historical and mythical figure, scholars try to understand how the Robin Hood of these tales and came to be. What are the origins of Robin Hood and what can they tell people about the past? What is the historical basis for Robin Hood, if any?

King Arthur and Robin Hood: The History and Folklore of England’s Most Famous Folk Legends comprehensively examines the history and stories of the Arthurian legend and everyone’s favorite bandit, while also looking at how they affected English history and became as popular as they are today. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about King Arthur and Robin Hood like never before.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Arthur's Tomb* (1855)

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King Arthur

Chapter 1: Searching for Arthur



The Lady of the Lake gives Excalibur to King Arthur (1880)

“There drew he forth the brand Excalibur,
And o’er him, drawing it, the winter moon,
Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth
And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt:
For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,
Myriads of topaz-lights, and jacinth-work
Of subtlest jewellery.” – Lord Tennyson

On the high sea cliffs of Cornwall's North Coast there is a place steeped in legend, weathered by centuries, and, as is so often the case in such places, encrusted in tourist nick-knacks: the ruins of Tintagel Castle, the legendary place of the conception of King Arthur. Visitors arrives in the village of Tintagel - until recently named Trevana - and perhaps parks in the Middle Ages Parking Lot and walks by the Merlin's Slot Machines and numerous shops with wizard-shaped candles and glass dragons. This is the Arthuriana of today. It is both amusing and tacky, but Tintagel Castle and the legends born there have far deeper layers beyond the plastic swords and Disney knock-offs.

Entering the historic site brings people to the next level of Arthur's story. Looking at the interpretative signs, visitors quickly realize they are hardly the first to look back on Arthur and his knights. This castle was rebuilt once before, during the Tudor Age of King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I, in a far grander style than its original form. It is predominantly these 15th century walls that tumble dramatically down the cliffs and sit amongst tough heather plants, back by the dramatic slate-gray sea. This grandiose construction served one purpose: to demonstrate that the Tudor Kings positioned themselves as the foretold return of Arthur, who they imagined to be the paragon of their elaborate code of chivalry and the first great king of their lands.

At the same time, there is a deeper history to Arthur and a more ancient Tintagel yet. This Arthur was a mighty warrior, maybe a mythical being who perhaps led the Celtic people of Britain's Dark Age in a glorious and ultimately unsuccessful defense of the island from Germanic invaders. That castle remains here too. A simple post-Roman fort guarding a harbor leading to rich sea routes, its crumbled walls served as the foundations for the Tudors' construction.

There are two ways of exploring the origins of Arthur. The first is to scour the historical and archaeological record for potential candidates who might have been the "real" Arthur. These historical figures emerged after the collapse of the Roman Empire and might have served as the original template. Historians may then attempt to track how various peoples throughout history have built upon, elaborated or simplified the story.

Given all the time that has passed, a second method involves ignoring the question of whether there was a "real" Arthur and instead treats the entire Matter of Britain as a mythological cycle. This is done simply by analyzing the literature itself. What does the Arthurian Cycle tell people about humanity? How is it connected to other myths, and is there a connection to a shared human "mono-myth"?

Although they sound completely different, these two approaches are not actually mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible and maybe even probable that there was a historical figure or figures who inspired the Arthurian legend. At the same time, Arthur's durability across time is certainly due more to his mythological components, his relationship to ancient stories, and to the universal human story. By tracing both the historical and mythological origins of Arthur, it's possible to see where they differ and where they converge, which forms a more comprehensive (and complex) body of stories that comprises *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*.

Chapter 2: Historic Origins



16th century statue of King Arthur

In 1991, historian Thomas Charles-Edwards wrote, "[A]t this stage of the enquiry, one can only say that there may well have been an historical Arthur...the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him." Indeed, when searching for the historical figure who Arthur is based upon, a decent place to start is with the acknowledgment that such a person may never have actually existed. It was quite common

for writers in the Middle Ages to conflate fictional and historical figures. For example, in Dante's *Inferno*, historical and legendary figures mingle together frequently. In England, medieval chroniclers turned the twin Saxon horse gods of Hengest and Horsa into historic warlords who they claim led the Saxon invasion of Britain, and those figures also bear striking similarities to other mythological figures concocted by other European peoples. [1]

That said, while it is possible that Arthur has no historic origins, it is also very possible that he does. Naturally, many scholars (of both the professional and armchair varieties) have speculated over who these figures might be, and there is still heavy debate on the topic.

The most prominent figure among these theories is Ambrosius Aurelianus, also known as Emrys Wledig in Welsh. The chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that Ambrosius was the second son of Emperor Constantine, and that as a child he was sent to live in Brittany to escape King Vortigern of Britain. [2] As a young man, Ambrosius returned to a Britain in chaos amidst the collapse of Vortigern's control and the hordes of invading Saxons. He battled Vortigern and is said to have won control over the western regions of Britain, including those that are still the most Celtic today. Vortigern called increasingly upon Saxon allies as the two battled for control, and eventually Vortigern fled, leaving Ambrosius as "King of the Britons." After the death of Vortigern, Ambrosius pushed the Saxons back to the north of Britain, where they remained for the rest of his life.

Ambrosius's role as a defender of the Britons was recorded by his contemporary, St. Gildas, in *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*). This is important, because Gildas does not mention Arthur. This fact can be interpreted in various ways. It can be taken as evidence for the Ambrosius connection, for the non-existence of a historical Arthur, or simply as an oversight, since he does not mention Vortigern either. Historians are almost certain that Vortigern existed.

Describing Ambrosius, St. Gildas wrote around 540 A.D., "That they might not be utterly destroyed, the remnants (of the British) take up arms, and challenge their victors to battle under Ambrosius Aurelianus. He was a man of unassuming character, who, alone of the Roman race, chanced to survive the storm in which his parents, people undoubtedly clad in the purple, had been killed. Their offspring in our days have greatly degenerated from their ancestral nobleness. From that time the citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy...up to the year of the Siege of Mons Badonicus." [3]

Another important and well-respected historian of the Dark Ages was Bede the Venerable, who also mentions Ambrosius but not Arthur. He wrote his Ecclesiastical History in 731 and describes Ambrosius in this way: “They had at that time for their leader, Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of worth, who alone, by chance, of the Roman nation had survived the storm, in which his parents, who were of the royal race, had perished. Under him the Britons revived, and offering battle to the victors, by the help of God, gained the victory. From that day, sometimes the natives, and sometimes their enemies, prevailed, till the year of the siege of Badon-hill, when they made no small slaughter of those enemies, about forty-four years after their arrival in England.”[4]

Based on these sources, Ambrosius is well-placed to serve as the origin of Arthur. He is a nobleman who disappears and returns to take up his appointed role as the defender of the Britons, and during his reign, the Saxons are held back. The Britons rally behind him, and he is known for his moderation and wisdom. Moreover, his name "Aurelianus", while not exactly "Arthur", is similar enough to the legendary king that it's easier to imagine the evolution of his name into Arthur than it would be with a name like Vortigern.[5]

With that said, there's a major problem in this theory. The primary recorder of the life of Ambrosius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, also records the life of Arthur in great detail, and is quite clear in his writings that they are two different people. Geoffrey of Monmouth specifically states that Ambrosius's father and Arthur's father (Uther Pendragon) were both sons of King Constantine, a descendant of the Roman overlords. He also wrote that Arthur was born after Ambrosius's death. [6] Since Geoffrey is one of the most important chroniclers of Arthur's life, at least of those that survived the Middle Ages, his writings must carry some weight.



Howard Pyle's illustration of Uther Pendragon, who Geoffrey of Monmouth claimed was Arthur's father.

Another potential candidate is Riothamus, a name (or possibly a title) meaning "Great King." He is listed on the roll of Kings of Britain. Riothamus appears to have been a real person, or at least the Roman diplomat who wrote to him in 460 A.D. thought he was. Riothamus appears to have been king of the Celtic peoples of Brittany as well as Britain, and he was called across the Channel twice to lead military campaigns in Gaul. Most notably, this is the same time that Geoffrey of Monmouth would later say "Arthur" was fighting in Gaul.^[7] It is this overseas emphasis in Riothamus's biography, combined with Geoffrey's similar emphasis (lost in most later retellings), that supports the theory Riothamus is the historical Arthur. Riothamus has recently had a strong proponent in a scholar named Geoffrey Ashe, who championed that connection in his book *The Discovery of King Arthur*

(1985), but his evidence has not silenced the debate on the issue.

An interesting alternative proposal was that the name "Arthur" did not signify a person but a title, and that it meant "The Bear King". The word "art" means bear in many Celtic languages, including both Welsh and Cornish, and this theory is reinforced by two pieces of early evidence. The Y Gododdin, an 11th century Welsh poem, refers to a warrior who "glutted black ravens [i.e., killed many men] on the rampart of the stronghold, although he was no Arthur" (a reference which could, admittedly, mean a name as well).^[8] Then there is also the Artognou stone, found in Tintagel, which could translate to "Famous Bear."



A picture of the Artognou Stone

The written record of the Dark Ages, which is spotty at best, will never fully answer the questions about the nature of Arthur's origins and whether he was based on a real man, but there are other sources of evidence that scholars can rely on. While archaeology can tell historians much about the broad sweep of history, its ability to pinpoint the locations and events of specific individuals, especially in the deep past, is limited. Arthurian archaeology has focused upon the excavation of sites which have been passed down as being linked to Arthurian tales in the oral record.

The first and most recognizable site is the ruins of Tintagel Castle on the Cornish coast, where Arthur is said to have been conceived and born. Excavations performed at the site in the 1980s and '90s have shown that there was a Dark Age fort at the site during the appropriate period, and that it was particularly wealthy for the region,

which indicates that it was possibly the home of a local king or chieftain[9]. This leaves open the possibility that the written reports that survived the Middle Ages are accurate, though it does not confirm anything. A wrinkle emerged in 1998 when the caretakers of Tintagel, a government body called English Heritage, announced that they had found a piece of slate which read: "*Artognou, father of a descendant of Coll, has made [this].*" Further analysis led some to believe that the author was claiming descent from Coel Hen (the famous "Old King Cole") of York, also one of Arthur's claimed ancestors. The claim that this was proof for the Arthurian connection led to a storm of controversy which has not yet fully died down. This evidence is still fairly slim, but it increases the possibility that Tintagel is actually connected to the historic king.[10]



Ruins of Tintagel that date back to the Norman invasion.

Another well-known piece of evidence for the reality of Arthur emerged in 1191, when the monks of Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have found a tomb containing a man and a blonde-haired woman. The tomb was inscribed: "Here lies entombed King Arthur, with Guenevere

his second wife, on the Isle of Avalon." This was a blessing for the monastery, which had recently suffered a devastating fire, because the remains served to restore it to a position of prominence and gave it a lucrative source of pilgrim revenue. It also served as a useful piece of political propaganda during a period of Welsh-English struggle. As one writer noted, "The alleged discovery of Arthur's tomb, then, was propaganda that the English could use against the Welsh, proving to them definitively that their savior was permanently deceased and would never return to liberate them.[11]

Due to these reasons, as well as a lack of any evidence (both bodies and inscription disappeared), modern scholars strongly doubt the veracity of the Glastonbury find.[12] However, the area around Glastonbury remains a place rich in Arthurian connections, especially due to the belief that the Holy Grail - a key part of the Arthurian Cycle - is located there.

Another important archaeological site is the most likely purported location of Arthur's court at Camelot: the Cadbury Hill Fort. Like Tintagel, Cadbury has an association with Arthur in oral history which actually appears to pre-date the invention of Camelot by romantic literature in the 12th century. Archaeology at the site in the 1970s revealed the existence of a Dark Age hill fort. This was not a "castle" as people imagine them today, as such structures did not exist at the time of Arthur, but it was still an impressive fortification. Like Tintagel, the impressive fort indicates the presence of a prominent leader, if not a king. In fact, this is one of the most elaborate strongholds of the period ever found, giving credence to claims that the great warlord Arthur lived there.[13] Again, this does not mean that the powerful leader had to be Arthur, as there were other major figures of the period that could have financed and needed such a structure. Ambrosius Aurelianus and his enemy Vortigern both fit the bill, as does Riothamus and Arthur's legendary father, Uther Pendragon.



The Cadbury Hill Fort seen in the distance

Chapter 3: Merlin: A Single Plausible Candidate?



A 13th century manuscript illustration depicting Merlin reciting poems

The character of Merlin, the magical but human counselor of Arthur, is possibly as old as Arthur himself. The “Prophecies of Merlin” appear in early Celtic documents, and Merlin has come to be seen in recent years as a representative of the old, pre-Christian faith of Britain, perhaps even as the last of the Druids, even though there is no hint of this in the earliest writings except for his use of magic and his gift of prophecy.

Merlin's name appears to have been an alteration of the name Myrddin Wyllt, who was a legendary madman and prophet living in Dark Ages Scotland. A few texts survive within the National Library of Wales describing the seer living in the wild Caledonian forests of

Scotland and providing cryptic prophecy. It is probable that Geoffrey of Monmouth took this character, altered the name, and put his own words into his mouth, which was not an uncommon literary occurrence in those days. [14] Moreover, Geoffrey of Monmouth set Merlin as a historical figure in the times of Ambrosius and Vortigern, who came decades before Myrddin Wyllt lived, and he intersperses Merlin's prophecies with a mixture of both pagan and Christian elements. Geoffrey's publication of Merlin's supposed prophecies in the *Prophetiae Merlini* was taken very seriously until about the 17th century, when people of that era began to consider the prophecies false. Nevertheless, oral legends about Merlin's ties to Arthur, magic, druids, and Christianity were all passed down to create the figure as readers envision him today.

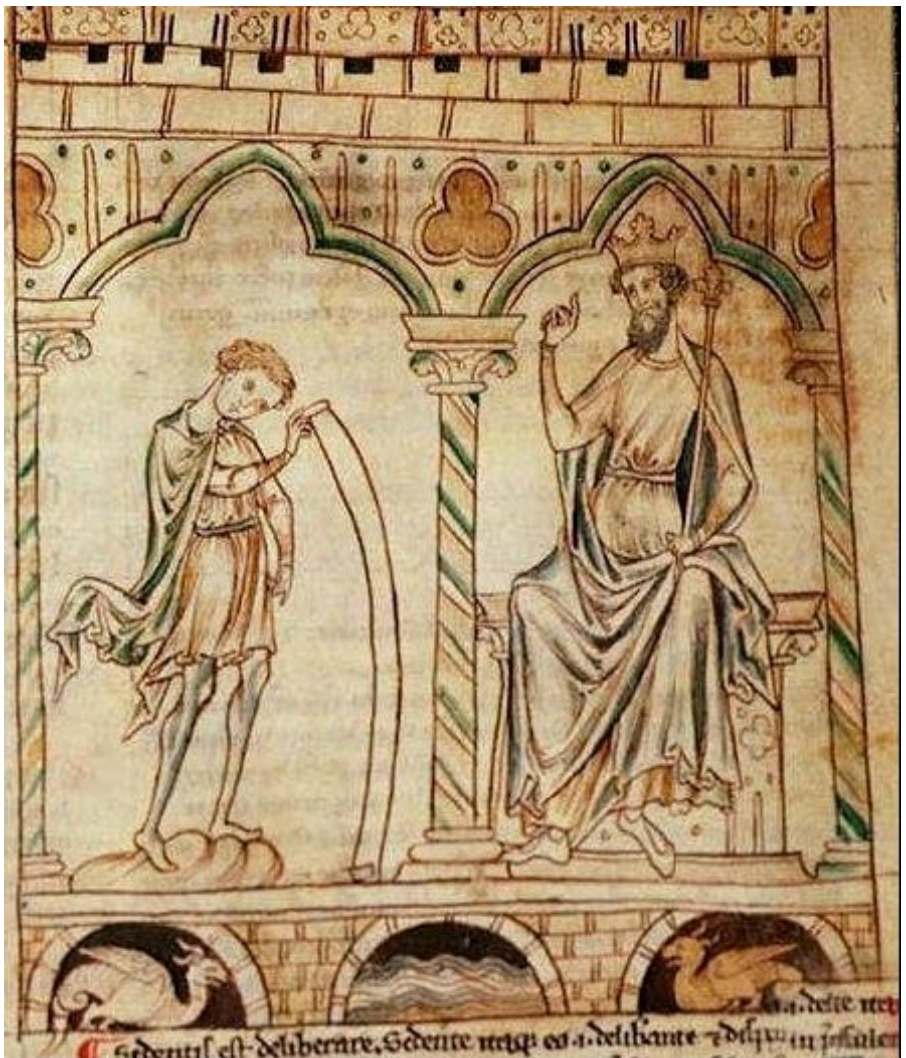


Illustration of Merlin and Vortigern from the *Prophetiæ Merlini*

Chapter 4: The Origins of Arthurian Folklore

As scholars began to study human myths and legends across cultures in the late 19th century, they began to discover some surprising cross-cultural similarities. These shared traits spawned an entire discipline of academia, including works by venerable scholars like James Frazer and Levi Strauss. One of the more fruitful avenues of examination was developed by an American scholar named Joseph Campbell, who would later become famous as a creative consultant for the Star Wars films. Looking across a wide variety of stories from around the world, Campbell postulated that they were all expressions of a single "Monomyth" ("mono" meaning "one"), which was an expression of something fundamental in human experience. Campbell argued that at the heart of all of these disparate stories was the tale of the "Hero," and he named his seminal work "Hero With a Thousand Faces." The hero was a representation of the human being, and his (or sometimes her) journeys reflect numerous aspects of life, including maturation from childhood to adulthood, the inner journey for enlightenment, and society's quest for harmony and perfection.

All of these elements were symbolized by the Hero's "Quest," which Campbell argued had several parts. The Quest begins with a "Call," when the Hero is separated out from the rest of society and marked as special. Then the Hero may gather wisdom from elderly advisers, pick up helpful tools or even reject the Call and be forced back on the right track. He then leaves the "known" world, entering another world of magic, power, danger and opportunity. There, the Hero engages in a number of "Tests," which are challenges - physical, mental or spiritual. Finally, the Hero faces an ultimate challenge, like battling his or her shadow twin, overcoming an ultimate temptation, or the need to die and be reborn. Finally, the Hero leaves the "unknown" world and returns home with a "boon," a tool for restoring the world.

The analysis of this myth involves simultaneously examining many layers of story together, because the Arthurian Cycle is not a single document in the way that a novel or a film is. The Arthurian Cycle is a collection of stories, songs, ceremonies and other texts that appear (and disappear) at different times in history. [15] Perhaps not surprisingly, some contradict each other outright, and others vary widely in style and message. These individual artistic pieces can be analyzed as myths on their own, but they also create a picture that can be taken as a whole.

The overarching myth in the Arthur Cycle is the story of the King himself. His birth is foretold famously by a young Merlin, who observes a battle between a red and white dragon that represent the

Celts and Saxons respectively.[16] In some stories, he is then hidden away in the home of a knight named Sir. Ector until the "Call" is made explicitly and he withdraws the Sword in the Stone. He then becomes the King of Britain, bringing an era of peace, justice and respite from Saxon invasion through his court at Camelot until he is brought down by his own son, Mordred, who he sired due to the magical trickery of his half-sister Morgause. The High King does not die but is instead taken away to the Isle of Avalon to await being reborn when his people need him most. All of the elements of the Hero's journey are present: the Call, the separation, gifts from wise and powerful helpers (like Merlin and the Lady of the Lake), challenges, and battle with his dark twin (his illegitimate nephew/son). His "boon" of good kingship is taken from the world until his return.

Of course, these are not the only tales woven into the Arthurian Cycle. While there are numerous small stories, the two other major arcs are the Betrayal of Queen Guinevere with Sir Lancelot, and the search for the Holy Grail, primarily by Sir Gawain and Sir Galahad. The tale of the Holy Grail is most explicitly a Hero's Journey, where the pure Galahad - enabled by the earlier boon of Arthur's court - is able to bring back the Holy Grail and restore Christ's love on Earth. Sir Thomas Malory cast Galahad as the ideal hero whose virtues are entirely due to his piety and chastity, and that theme was perpetuated by poets like Lord Tennyson, whose own Galahad states:

"My good blade carves the casques of men,
My tough lance thrusteth sure,
My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure...
I never felt the kiss of love,
Nor maiden's hand in mine."



George Frederic Watts' painting of Galahad

The Guinevere/Lancelot/Arthur tale is one of love, betrayal and suffering, and it is similar to another legend about Tristan and Isolde. Like in the story of the birth of Mordred, here Arthur is brought down not by force of arms but by betrayal, subterfuge and incest. The Guinevere-Lancelot story is not literal incest (and is thus not as destructive as the Mordred story), but it comes close since both figures have deep bonds to Arthur. Guinevere is his wife, and Lancelot is his brother-in-arms and was raised by Arthur's benefactor, the Lady of the Lake. It is the deep nature of the betrayal that gives the story much of its mythological power. One anthropologist of myth, Claude Levi Strauss, examined the taboo against incest, noting its universality in human societies and explaining how its appearance in myth serves to represent an inversion of the social order and typically presages the destruction of that same order.[\[17\]](#)



Herbert James Draper's painting of Guinevere and Lancelot

Furthermore, it can be argued that Arthur emerges as a "culture hero," a "a mythical or mythicized historical figure who embodies the aspirations or ideals of a society."[\[18\]](#) The earliest Arthur stories have him not as a king or enemy of the Saxons but as a wandering hero who embodies the best of what the Britons saw in men: bravery, generosity, loyalty to family, and physically vibrant. Finn MacCool or Fionn mac Cumhaill fulfills a similar role amongst the Gaelic peoples of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Mann. Where Arthur is the great mythical king, endowed with great powers but still mortal, of the Britons (especially the Welsh and Cornish), Fionn holds the same position amongst the western neighbors. In fact, the biggest difference

between Fionn and Arthur is that the stories about Fionn simply didn't circulate as far or as much during the Middle Ages, ensuring that his story was less well-known. And since less was written about Fionn over the centuries, the legend didn't continue to build upon previous works, thus making Fionn's story less modern at the same time.

While Arthur may or may not have been based on historical figures, there are several characters that most certainly have mythological roots, particularly Morgan la Fey and the Lady of the Lake. Much speculation has been made about Morgan La Fey. The title "La Fey" literally means "the Fairy," but in a time long before Tinkerbell transformed popular images of them, fairies were powerful, mysterious, and otherworldly beings. What is agreed about Morgan is that she is a woman with magical powers who is deeply involved, though typically at a distance, with Arthur's reign. She sometimes aims to undermine him and sometimes seems more benign. The scholarly argument revolves around whether she was a creation of the Arthurian storytellers or whether she descends from a pre-Christian Celtic goddess (in Irish myth, the pre-Christian gods became known as the Fey after they were driven underground by the Humans). The most common argument is that she is the Welsh goddess Modron, but with her Breton name "Morgan." Less plausible but still possible is that she is a reference to the Irish war goddess Morrigan[19].

Like Morgan La Fey, the Lady in the Lake (who has many names) is most likely derived from ancient legends. The Lady's home in a kingdom under the waters of a magical lake, her gifts to the heroes Arthur and Lancelot, and her eventual presence on the boat that takes Arthur back to Avalon (hence her apparent immortality) all speak to her as more of a water-spirit or water-goddess than a woman. This has led some scholars to argue that she is a remnant of an earlier Celtic lake goddess.[20] Some have gone a step further and maintained that Morgan and the Lady are in fact aspects of the same goddess divided into two characters - one virtuous and one villainous - by later writers, but this argument is largely speculative.[21]



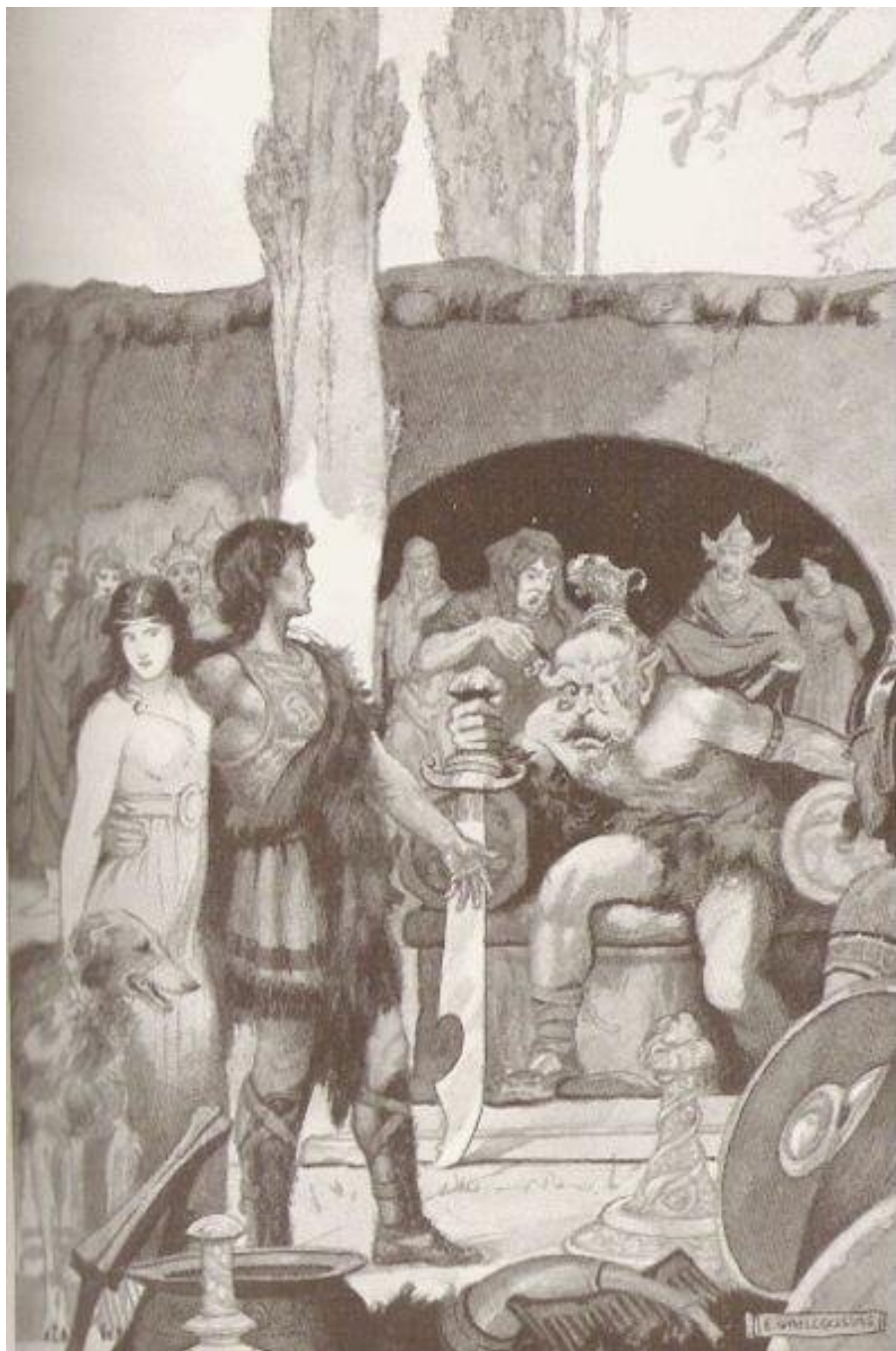
Howard Pyle's illustration of Morgan La Fay tossing Excalibur's sheath to the Lady in the Lake.

Chapter 5: Early Literature

While legend says that Arthur was born at Tintagel Keep, a more accurate statement might be that Arthur and the Arthurian legend were born out of the imaginations, the fears and the dreams of the Celtic speaking peoples of western and southwestern Britain, those who are today called the Welsh and Cornish. Scholars refer to the earliest stage of Arthur literature as "Pre-Galfridian," with Galfridus being the Latin name for "Geoffrey". In other words, Pre-Galfridian literature consists of writings that existed before Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote *History of the Kings of Britain*. Today's scholars have five full manuscripts and 20 shorter texts which refer to Arthur, though many of these mention him only somewhat in passing. It's safe to assume that there were far more works that did not survive, and there were countless oral tales that were probably never recorded. Thus, most scholars assume these 25 works are the tip of an unknowable iceberg[22].

The earliest tale about Arthur is the Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, believed to have been written in the early 12th century. In this tale, Arthur is as a defender of the people, "a defender of his country against every kind of danger, both internal and external: a slayer of giants and witches, a hunter of monstrous animals -- giant boars, a savage cat monster, a winged serpent (or dragon)." [23] He is also a freer of prisoners, an important role for the Welsh peasants who feared slavers, whether they were Saxon, Norse or others. It was not until rather late in this role as a freer of prisoners that Arthur begins to become a war-hero and a leader of the defense of Celtic Britain against the Saxons.

Arthur's companions at this point include Cai and Bedwyr, who would become Sir Kay and Sir Bedivere respectively. They are heroes and strongmen who travel the countryside fighting magical monstrosities. Cai is the chief of these followers, and unlike the boastful Sir Kay, who is used for comic relief by the troubadours, Cai is a hero second-only to Arthur himself. Bedwyr, Arthur's other close companion, wielded a magical spear and was famous for a battle with a wolf-man. [24]



Charles Squire's 1920 depiction of Culhwch at Ysbaddaden's court, which appeared in *Celtic Myth & Legend*.

Along with Cai and Bedwyr, Arthur was also often accompanied by Gwalchmei, son of Gwyr. Gwalchmei is the son of Arthur's sister, and this character might be the prototype for Gawain, though this is not as

easy to trace as the connections between Cai-Kay and Bedwyr-Bedivere.

The next major character is Medraut, the early Mordred. The nature of this character is a bit obscure, as "no source uninfluenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth or the Bruts makes Medraut Arthur's nephew or his betrayer/opponent -- in fact they seem rather to contradict these claims" making him a hero or a companion of Arthur. [25] Unlike Gwalchmei, who is specifically named as a kinsman of Arthur, no such connections are made for Medraut.

Uthyr Pendragon, who becomes Arthur's father Uther in later writings, also appears in the earliest writings. It is probable that he was thought of as Arthur's father or something of a magical Merlin-like figure who changes form and advises the hero.

Finally, this early tale included Gwenhwyfar, better known today as Guinevere, Arthur's wife. One of the prominent stories involving her has to do with her kidnapping by a villain named Melway. After Arthur becomes a leader, his military campaigns, including a siege of Glastonbury, help win her back.

The tale of *Culhwch and Olwen* was preserved in a Welsh language collection called the Mabinogion, which was only translated into English by Lady Charlotte Guest in the 19th century. In the Mabinogion, Arthur is an overlord and a famed slayer of monsters. Arthur's cousin Culwch requests his aid in winning the marriage of a beautiful giant named Olwen, who he is infatuated with due to a curse from his spiteful stepmother. Arthur sends his warriors (including Cai, Bedwyr and Gwalchmei), and Olwen's father requests the completion of 40 impossible tasks (though the tale only recounts a few of them). This tale, however, largely serves as a frame for a long exposition of the heroic events in the life of Arthur, and lists of important persons. The most well-known event, which was recounted in other places as well, was Arthur's hunt of the great boar Twrch Trwyth. The direct links to oral traditions can be seen in this story: the recounting of long lists of ancestry was an important part of the bardic oral tradition, and the tale of Twrch Trwyth has direct links to other famous boars of Celtic lore. The great boar in the Mabinogion is similar to the Torc Triath in Ireland and the great Cornish sow Henwen, which gave birth to monsters fought by the Pre-Galfridian heroes. In fact, some legends claim Henwen gave birth to the cat-monster Cath Palug, which was killed by either Cai or Arthur, depending on the version. [26]

In these early stories, the picture of Arthur established by earlier sources is of a leader of a roving band of warriors. This band includes Cai, Bedwyr, Gwalchmei, Medraut and occasionally Uthyr, and the

band wins glory, fights for treasure (such as a magical cauldron from Ireland), travels to the underworld, kills monsters, frees prisoners and protects the people of the land. In this form, they closely resemble other culture heroes, including the Irishman Finn Mac Cumhaill and his band of warriors, the Fenians. Arthur and his band are also depicted like the Irishman Cú Chulainn, and even the Greeks' Theseus.

Over time, however, this role of being the protector of the people would evolve from killing monsters to fighting the Saxons, the primary enemy of the Welsh and Cornish in the years after the fall of the Roman Empire. This transformation is easy to understand, regardless of whether Arthur was based on a historical figure or not. For example, it could be that there was a historical figure like Ambrosius to whom subsequent legends were attached, or it could be that there was simply an evolution in the mythological character of Arthur to suit new needs in cultural storytelling.

Perhaps the most important event attributed to this new Arthur was the victory at the Battle of Badon. Interestingly, the first reference to Badon is by the chronicler St. Gildas, who does not mention Arthur but describes Ambrosius Aurelianus as the leader. He sets its date at 496 A.D. and describes how the victory in this battle halted the advance of the Saxons for a generation, guaranteeing the peace and survival of the Celtic peoples. Gildas is particularly important because he is the only person who wrote of the battle as having occurred in his lifetime. 496 was the year of his birth, but the events certainly would have been within memory of his parents' generation and make him the closest contemporary to them. The battle is also mentioned by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731 A.D.), and he credits the victory to Ambrosius.

About 65 years later, the Welsh monk Nennius describes the battle and attributes it to Arthur in his *Historia Britonum* (circa 796 A.D.). Nennius also gives long descriptions of Arthur's campaigns against the Saxons. Furthermore, another similar source is the *Annales Cambriae*, which is dated to around 796 A.D. and written in the same manuscript as Nennius's work. *Annales Cambriae* elaborates on Arthur's role, and after these were published near the end of the 8th century, Ambrosius is no longer credited with the battle and it is always attributed to Arthur. It should also be noted that the battle is never mentioned in Saxon sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but this might be simply because it did not have the same importance when viewed from their eyes.[\[27\]](#)

There was another battle during this period that would become central to the Arthurian legend: the Battle of Camlann. In this battle, Arthur and Mordred face off, leaving Mordred dead and Arthur

gravely wounded. The *Annales Cambriae* mentions this battle as having occurred in 537 and mentions that both men died, but not that they fought against each other [28].

a n.	monē.	demonia expuls?
a n. ccc. xl.	Yalta an. regn rex demeto	Cinan rex morit.
ti birctoni. cū of.	rū. & caceſ. pout mon	An. Gueth lanmaef.
fa inettate.	unē.	an.
an.	an. Elboz archi epī	an.
an.	guenedote. regione	an.
an.	migrauit ad domi	an.
an.	nū.	an. Arcē detantog
an.	an. Combustio mi	asaxonib; destruit.
an.	nu.	s regione pout
an.	an. Eugen fil' mar	in ſua poctate
an.	gecau d morit.	traxet.
an.	an. De cancorū icu	an.
an.	fulminis cōburne.	an. ccc. lxxx.
a n. ecc. l.	an. Bellum int hi	an. higuel morit.
an. Prim ^o aduen	guel uictor fuit.	an.
tuſgenaliū. ap	an.	an.
dexteraleſ adhi	an. ecc. lxxx.	an.
bernū.	Tomatuum mag	an.
an. Offa rex mer	nū fuit incendia	an.
ciorū. & morge	multa fecit.	an. Laudent morit.
tud. rex demet	Trifun fil' regn	s facē bu hail
corū. morte mo	morit.	minu morit.
riunt. & bella	Fe griphuid fi	an.
nud glann.	li cinceu dolofa	an.
an.	diſpenſatione a	an. ccc. xcc.
an. Caratauc rex	fuere ſuo eli red	an.
guenedote ap	p int uallū duo	an.
saxonuſ iugulae.	rū menſū int.	an.
an.	ficit. higuel	an.
an.	demonia mſo	an.
an.	la triumphā	an. Nobis ep' s
an.	uit. ſeman de	minutu reg
an.	ca expulſit. cū	name. An. An. lud groll
an. ecc. lx.	conſtitutione mag	an.
an.	na ex er cū ſut	an. cccc. merrnu
an.	an.	mor. gueth
a n. Argen rex	an. higuel itū	cetū.
cercetiaun		

A page from the *Annales Cambriae*

What happened between the early 500s when Gildas wrote and the late 700s when Nennius wrote? It is possible that Nennius created the Arthur at Badon story, but its widespread acceptance after the *Annales Cambriae* and Nennius's work indicates Arthur had been given credit

for being at the battle in oral legends before those writings. By the 9th century, Arthur had most likely emerged from his position as a leader of a band of wandering heroes to become the military defender of the Welsh and Cornish. It was probable that he was already the Once and Future King at this point and that he had taken primacy in the legends of his people. This was probably a slow, multi-generational process, as stories about him were told and retold as they were passed down to subsequent generations.

The Arthurian Legend has always been plastic enough to absorb outside stories, from King Lear and Ambrosius Aurelianus to Joseph of Arimathea. One of the more prominent stories to join the Arthurian legend has been that of Tristan and Isolde. The story is a straightforward romance. Tristan serves King Mark of Cornwall lovingly, bravely and loyally. But when Mark sends Tristan to pick up his new Irish bride, Isolde, the two accidentally drink a love potion intended for Mark and Isolde. Their love tears apart the court and finally destroys them. By the late Middle Ages, this story is worked into the Arthurian legend via *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but it appears to have originally been a stand-alone tale itself. It certainly presages the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot tragedy, but the story of Tristan and Isolde contains more magic than that story, since Lancelot and Guinevere made conscious decisions while Tristan and Isolde were controlled by outside forces.

The fusion of Tristan's story and the Arthurian legend is important because it demonstrates the conversion of the Arthur story from a tale of Celtic resistance to one of courtly romance and chivalry. The story's references to Cornwall and Tristan's legendary home of Lyonesse, an island kingdom that sunk under the sea off the coast of Cornwall, have made it popular in Cornish circles, and it was the first major work to be translated into Modern Cornish. It has also been the target of French scholarship ever since folklorist Joseph Bedier argued that all of the Tristan tales could be traced back to a single "ur-Tristan", which he attempted to reconstruct in 1900.[\[29\]](#)

After the Norman invasion of Britain, the arrival of the tradition of French romances brought one of the most important elements of the modern Arthurian legend into the fold: the Quest for the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from during the Last Supper and which caught his blood during the Crucifixion.

For several centuries, there has been a folk belief in Britain that during Jesus Christ's "unknown years", the time after his childhood and before his ministry (which the Bible is silent on), Jesus accompanied his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, on a trade journey to Britain. A further extension of this story is that after Christ's death,

Joseph of Arimathea took the Holy Grail to Britain and brought Christianity along with him.[30] He supposedly settled in Glastonbury and established the monastery there, and then his descendants became monarchs of Britain, including Arthur. Some modern scholars argue that this story depicts a Christianization of early Celtic gods thought of as royal ancestors.[31] The legend was that Joseph hid the Grail in the "Chalice Well" in Glastonbury, and from that hill two springs emerged, one with red water representing the blood of Christ and one of white water representing the sweat of Christ[32].

Joseph is also said to have brought a staff grown from the Crown of Thorns and planted it in Glastonbury, which has its own Arthurian associations as the possible site of Avalon. This thorn tree was said to flower at Christmas and Easter, which was not typical of normal hawthorns, and there has long been a tradition of sending its flowers to the Royal Christmas Table. The original tree was cut down by Oliver Cromwell's troops in the English Civil War, but today its branches live and are grafted onto other trees.

This legend dates back to at least the 12th century, where it can be found in a poem entitled *Joseph d'Arimathie* by Robert de Boron, but it became particularly popular in Britain during the 19th century. Even then, it was associated with the Arthurian legend, as de Boron claimed that Perceval was a descendant of Joseph. It was crystallized in a poem "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time" by William Blake (1808), which was eventually turned into a song titled "Jerusalem." In it, Blake asks "and did those feet in ancient time./Walk upon England's mountains green:/And was the holy Lamb of God,/On England's pleasant pastures seen!" Blake's song became famous throughout Britain and is the anthem of the Women's Institute, thanks to its fusion of English exceptionalism, Christian nationalism and Romantic anti-industrialism (it condemns the "Dark, Satanic Mills").

Chapter 6: Arthur's Chroniclers

Geoffrey of Monmouth is the single most important chronicler of the story of Arthur in history. Geoffrey brought Arthur to the world outside of Welsh- and Cornish-speaking communities and laid the groundwork for every subsequent tale. It could be said that he was the literal "kingmaker", as it is in Geoffrey's writings that Arthur is first referred to as a "king."

Who was this man, and what were all his additions to the Arthurian canon? Geoffrey, who had no last name (like most people in his era), was a priest who lived roughly 1100-1155 and is best known for his work *Historia Regnum Britaniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain"). Geoffrey was born somewhere in Wales or the Welsh borderlands, and while his birthday is unknown, he was recorded as an official witness (and hence was an adult) in 1129. He refers to himself as "of Monmouth," so he was either born there or had some strong relationship to the town. There is no good evidence to suggest that Geoffrey spoke Welsh, and he probably hailed from the French-speaking Norman elite, as he lived roughly a century after the Norman invasion. Geoffrey certainly knew Latin, since his works are all written in the language. While he may not have spoken Welsh himself, he was certainly well-aware of the Welsh legends surrounding Arthur and incorporated them directly into his writings.^[33]

Geoffrey came along at the perfect time for the transformation of Arthur's image. The Arthurian myths of Wales were staunchly anti-Saxon, but the new elite after the invasion of 1066 was not Saxon or even Germanic. William the Conqueror and the Normans had no problem with stories about heroes fighting the Saxons. That said, there was still conflict between the Normans and Welsh, due to the Normans' desire to conquer all of Britain, which is why the Abbot of Glastonbury attempted to appropriate Arthur by "finding" his body near the end of the 12th century. Ultimately, Geoffrey's work was so widely popular and distributed that even Norman kings began to take an interest in the Arthurian legend.

What Geoffrey attempted to do was to construct a complete history of Britain from the time of its purported settlement by Trojan refugees, through the invasion of Caesar, the Roman Occupation, the withdrawal of the Roman legions and the Saxon invasion. Geoffrey's work is, like many of its time, a fusion of previous works and his own imagination; Geoffrey had the good fortune, though, of apparently having access to numerous Welsh-language texts and possibly oral tradition from the Welsh bards. Hence, unlike other prominent

accounts of the time, most notably the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it has an infusion of history from Britain's Celtic peoples and in its accounts of the Dark Ages, tells the story largely from their perspective.

Another work by Geoffrey that has relevance to this account is his *Prophetiae Merlini* (the "Prophecies of Merlin"), in which he apparently took the well-known Welsh prophet Myrddin Wyllt and added him to his account of the life of Arthur. Geoffrey placed an elaborate prophecy into his mouth, and there's no evidence that the "prophecy" was anything but Geoffrey's creation.

Though he discussed many kings and eras, the most influential element of Geoffrey's work, both when it was written and today, is his expansive recounting of the story of King Arthur. Since nobody knows the exact nature or age of the written and/or oral Welsh sources that Geoffrey had access to, it's almost impossible to know with certainty how much of his writing consisted of his own fabrications. However, scholars can trace which elements of the Arthurian legend first appeared in Geoffrey's retelling.

First, Arthur is explicitly named a High King of Britain and placed in a line of kings between his father Uther Pendragon and Constantine. [34] This is perhaps the final step in the centuries-long process of converting the ancient wandering hero into the defender of the nation. Geoffrey further heightened Arthur's importance by introducing Merlin and giving an extensive prophecy that predicts the king's birth and life. Geoffrey also had Merlin performing other miracles, such as the transportation of Stonehenge from Ireland to its current location, and Geoffrey associated Tintagel and Caerleon (which became the prototype for Camelot) with Arthur's story, thereby rooting him in the real world [35]. Lastly, Geoffrey converted Arthur from being a defender of the people at Badon Hill into being a great conqueror who led his armies all the way to Rome and gave territories to his greatest followers along the way. And of course, Arthur is presented as a benevolent ruler who organizes spectacular ceremonies and grants largess. [36]



Ruins of the ancient Round Tower at Caerleon

In addition to refashioning the story, Geoffrey also made the crucial step of retelling his story in Latin. While the *Annales Cambriae* were written in Latin and mention Arthur, the account is so brief - two lines without context or explanation - that it had none of the impact that

Geoffrey's texts did. Books were much rarer in those days, since they had to be transcribed by hand, but Geoffrey's work was so popular that 215 copies survive today. [37] It made an indelible mark on the culture of Norman Britain and began the process of creating the modern Arthur.

After Geoffrey's work, perhaps the next most influential piece of the Arthurian legend was the seminal *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written by the "knight-prisoner" Sir Thomas Malory in 1469 or 1470 and published by William Caxton (owner of Britain's first printing press) in 1485. The combination of Caxton's ability to distribute the work widely and the inherent beauty of Malory's writing, which fused many of the popular tales of his time into a single work, has helped to make *Le Morte d'Arthur* a foundational work. Like Geoffrey's text some three centuries before, Malory changed the nature of the story of Arthur, and all subsequent works on Arthur owe a debt to him. [38]

Malory himself is a controversial figure. At the end of Book IV is written, "For this was written by a knight prisoner Thomas Malleorre, that God send him good recovery." Nevertheless, there was little consensus about his identity until 1897, when an American named George Lyman Kittredge published a book arguing that Malory was a knight by the same name from Warwickshire who was born around 1416 and died in 1470. Little is known about his early life, but as a young man he apparently found himself drawn into a notorious life of crime. He was imprisoned at Newgate Prison for crimes in 1450, including ambushing the Duke of Buckingham with 26 outlaws, raping a woman named Joan Smith twice, twice extorting the residents of a town named Monks Kirby, and robbing the husband of Joan Smith. [39] In 1451, after a warrant for his arrest was issued, he is said to have stolen cattle, and then, while the Duke of Buckingham and his men hunted him, he raided the Duke's hunting lodge. The Duke caught up with him and arrested him in 1451, but he escaped imprisonment in the castle he was held in by swimming the moat. He is then said to have gathered a hundred followers and raided a monastery at Coombe Abbey before he was imprisoned again in 1452. While waiting for trial for 8 years, he was bailed out and allegedly went cattle rustling in East Anglia, which led to an arrest, an escape, and yet another arrest again.

Malory's crimes occurred at an important point in British history. The kingdoms were about to be plunged into a civil war, the War of the Roses, which raged on and off from 1455-1485. There were skirmishes before the official "start" date, and the events of Malory's life might be seen within that context. In particular, his enemy the Duke of Buckingham, Humphrey Stafford, was a close ally of the

Lancastrians in the conflict to come, and at one point he was captured by the Yorkists after commanding an army against them. By 1451, Stafford was already a prominent figure, and the conflict had already begun to simmer as the Lancastrians had taken control of the Privy Council.[40]

By the 1460s, Malory reappears in history as fighting on the side of the Yorkists in the War of the Roses. He was freed by the Yorkists and aided them in capturing castles in Northumberland. However, he apparently changed sides (though the details are mysterious) and was explicitly excluded from a Yorkist pardon in 1468 and 1470, despite once again being in Newgate, where he was presumably writing *Le Morte d'Arthur*. When the Yorkist enemies, the Lancastrians, came to power in 1470, he was freed. He died a mere six months later.[41]

Given the context in which Malory was writing and the type of man he was, what role did that play in his writing of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and what did he add to the Arthurian legend? The most notable aspect is the generous infusion of Norman sentiment, with the concepts of chivalry and the importance placed on knighthood. The modern Arthur is synonymous with chivalry, and this is perhaps Malory's greatest addition; he appears to desire to use Arthur as a moral template to compare to modern knighthood, and naturally he found his contemporaries seriously lacking. The stories of knights like Gawain, Pellamor and the other members of the Round Table were used as explanatory tales regarding the concept of chivalry.



Medieval illustration depicting Sir Gawain

However, while Malory put the Round Table front and center, he did not invent the concept. Tournaments long before his time were called "Round Tables" and were often held in honor of Arthur. It appears that King Edward I, who ruled from 1272-1307, was a great Arthur enthusiast and commissioned a great and famous round table at Winchester. The table still exists there today, but it was elaborately repainted at the orders of Henry VIII, with an image of himself put in the place of Arthur. [42]

Malory's work is the first to describe the story of the Sword in the Stone, and he also expands greatly upon the role of Merlin. The treacherous Morgan la Fey appears in this story, and the tale of Tristan and Isolde is also integrated. Malory has Lancelot - a French

import - eclipsing the native Gawain in his tale, and he develops the complete modern telling with Lancelot loving Guinevere, Lancelot being tricked by Elayne to conceive Galahad, Galahad as a pure Christ figure taking the Sege Perilous at the Round Table, the Grail Quest, Mordred forcing Arthur to punish Guinevere and Lancelot, and the final battle between Arthur and Mordred.

Malory gives life and flesh to the characters in a way that hadn't been done in print before. Arthur is a tragic hero who knows his own destiny and yet strives to live rightly and justly despite it, even after being betrayed by the two he loves most of all. Lancelot is the noble man who is divided by two loves and punished for it, both by being unable to find the Grail and by exile. Gawain is hot-blooded and vengeful but loyal to Arthur to the last, and Guinevere lives a double life as a moral compass for the chivalric order who ultimately betrays that order with her affair.[\[43\]](#)

While Geoffrey was able to draw upon the legends of the Welsh in the construction of his narrative of Arthur's life, Malory had another set of oral folktales at his disposal: the French troubadours who traveled from court to court in his day. This tradition was brought over from France by the Normans during their invasion of 1066 and was rich in Arthurian tales. These tales elaborated the romantic dimensions and are famous for their stories of impossible courtly love and betrayal.

What Malory did was set the stage for one of the most important shifts in the history of the Arthurian legend. Arthur went from being a symbol of Welsh and Cornish resistance against the English state to the very opposite, as a symbol of Englishness, a legitimizer for the English monarchs, and an ideological reason for the integration of all of Britain (his "old kingdom") under English authority. This process was begun by Geoffrey, who made Arthur accessible to the literate classes who read his widespread Latin text. However, Malory made his work and thus the whole body of Arthurian legend accessible to a widespread English-language readership through mass printed publication. The book was very popular, greatly shaping an already nascent presence of Arthur in the English populace.

By doing so, Malory opened the door for the Tudors. The War of the Roses finally came to an end without either the House of Lancaster or York taking the throne. Instead, a previously minor branch of the Lancastrians came to the throne. Hailing from northern Wales, the Tudors had enjoyed a meteoric rise to power, leading to the coronation of Henry VII as king in 1485. Tudor, like many Welsh nobles, traced his ancestry to Arthur and made Arthurianism state policy. The Welsh Tudor dynasty would be the foretold return of the

Once and Future King, and Henry went so far as to name his oldest son "Arthur," though the young man died before taking the throne, leaving it open to his legendary brother, Henry VIII. It was during this period that the ruins of Tintagel Castle were reconstructed as an homage to Henry's legendary ancestor.[\[44\]](#)



King Henry VII of England

Like in Ancient Rome, where Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid* appropriated, translated and transformed Greek mythology in order to convince the Republican citizens of Rome of the legitimacy of their new Emperors, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* translated and repackaged a Welsh myth and was used to convince an English public of the legitimacy of their new Welsh king.

Chapter 7: Modern Arthur

With an easily-accessible text in English and the official backing of the British state, Arthurianism was able to set down deep roots in Early Modern Europe. The story of Arthur followed Geoffrey's imagination and conquered Europe.

The first place where Arthur gained popularity was in France, where the poet Jean Bodel (1165-1210) described three "Matters" "that no man should be without. These matters "were the great literary cycles of his time." [45] They included Rome (with its classical mythology and the tales of the Caesars), France (with its stories of the Emperor Charlemagne), and Britain (with the stories of Arthur and his knights. [46]) Building upon this concept, another Frenchman, Jacques de Longuyon, wrote a text entitled *Voeux du Paon* in 1312 which laid out the "Nine Worthies" who chivalric men ought to emulate. Three of them, Hector, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, were from the Pagan World. Another three, Joshua, David and Judas Macabeus, were Jewish war heroes from the Old Testament. The final three, Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon, were Christian Europeans. [47] This concept entered pan-European culture, appearing in works like Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* [48].

In Britain, Arthurianism became the semi-official theme of Royal and noble gatherings throughout the Tudor period. For instance, during the reign of Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch, aspiring noblemen would host Arthurian-themed balls, tournaments and pageants, which included costumes and appropriate decorations, to curry favor with the Queen. [49]

While Arthur was never forgotten, he did fade from importance as the chivalric world that (re)constructed him disappeared. In the centuries of exploration, industrialization, and enlightenment, Arthur took a back seat, as did the concepts of chivalry, nobility and Christian virtue that he represented. The 17th and 18th centuries looked back to the Classical Era of Ancient Greece and Rome for their history, ideals and icons.

However, in the mid-19th century, there was a new surge of interest in medieval times. In literature and art, this movement was known as Romanticism, and in architecture it heralded the rise of the Neo-Gothic. It was especially connected to ethnic nationalism in places like Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The great emblems of this period included the operas of Wagner, the "fairy-tale" castle of Neuschwanstein in Bavaria, and the great Arthurian poem *The Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

In *The Idylls*, Tennyson does not innovate greatly upon the story of Arthur. He drew upon Malory and the recently-translated Welsh tales of the *Mabinogion*, which were first made available in English translation by Lady Charlotte Guest between 1838 and 1849. The influence of Romantic Nationalism was apparent, as there was an increasing interest in Welsh folktales amongst the English-speaking public, including many who were Welsh themselves. This made materials available that had not been integrated into Arthurian tales for many centuries.[\[50\]](#)

Tennyson's work is an epic poem, published in pieces between 1856 and 1885. Like many Romantic works, *The Idylls* is a profoundly sad work, where its tragic figures work desperately, but fruitlessly in a story that all readers already know will end tragically.[\[51\]](#) It is no coincidence that the work is dedicated to the deceased Royal Consort, Prince Albert and that Tennyson worked in a royal court full of mourning for the dead prince. At the time of publication, Tennyson was the Poet Laureate of Britain, which, along with his immense popularity, gave his work a semi-official weight. The slow release of the works over decades created a prolonged literary event that influenced poetry, art and thought of an entire generation.

One example of this broader influence and the return of Arthur's popularity were the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) in Britain. The PRB was a collection of artists dedicated to reversing the influence of neo-classicism on art and to portray Romantic scenes. They often depicted medieval scenes, sometimes with Arthurian themes such as "The Lady of Shalott" by John William Waterhouse (1888)[\[52\]](#), "Queen Guinevere's Maying" by John Collier[\[53\]](#), "The Four Queens Find Lancelot Sleeping" (circa 1926) by Frank Carodgan Cowper[\[54\]](#), and an elaborate series of murals at Oxford Union depicting the life of Arthur by various artists.[\[55\]](#) This Victorian Arthurianism expressed many of the dreams of social conservatives in Britain, who looked back for an earlier golden age, even if they knew at that time that it never occurred in the way Malory described.[\[56\]](#)



Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*

It is this final Arthur that survives today. A legend replete with women in long flowing gowns, knights in polished armor, a sagacious and mysterious Merlin, love, treachery, gallantry and sadness. In its lighter form, it makes for great children's stories and Disney's *Sword in the Stone*. In its more serious, sad form, it appears in the tragic figure of the Fisher King[57] in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

Arthurianism has always looked wistfully back towards a better time. The tellers of Arthurian legends speak about an era when kings and knights lived up to the values that the storyteller sees as missing in his current world. While this is perhaps easier to see in the Neo-Gothicism and anti-Rationalism of the Victorian poets and artists, it appears as well in the earliest references to the King. In the Pre-Galfridian Welsh Poem *Y Gododdin*, the poet speaks of a brave warrior who, despite his glory on the battlefield, "was no Arthur"[58]. Even then, in the Dark Ages, the warriors simply could not live up to Arthur's legacy. But in a sense, that's the purpose of the "Hero". If anyone could match the deeds and morals of Arthur, he would lose his power. Certainly, Geoffrey, Malory, Tennyson and the venerators of the Nine Worthies knew this too. And there's no question that the mythological qualities of the story draw people to Tintagel and a search for the historical Arthur. Interest in a regional leader like Ambrosius who died 1500 years ago would always be slight, but people still seek to connect the dots because of the legend added onto

the actual history.

Robin Hood



Robin Hood Shoots with Sir Guy, an illustration by Louis Rhead (1912)

Chapter 1: The Historical Setting for Robin Hood

The stories of Robin Hood are set in a period known as the "High Middle Ages" or the "Gothic" era, which stretches through the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. In England, this period conveniently begins with the Norman Invasion led by William the Conqueror in 1066, and it is widely viewed as ending with the beginning of the Hundred Years War in 1337. The period was dominated by the feudal system, and though there were powerful kings during this era, their power was often checked by the strength of the nobility, such as in the First Baron's War in the time of John I (1215 - 1217). The strong central states that defined the reigns of the Tudors would not emerge for several more centuries.

There were other powerful social forces during that era. Perhaps the most prominent was the Catholic Church, which had not yet been divided by the Reformation or by King Henry VIII's establishment of the Church of England. Monasteries were places of great importance and wealth. At the same time, there were many autonomous royal towns that served as great draws for the rural population. In fact, the increased sickness in the towns meant that without continuous migration from the rural areas, they would not have been able to replace their own population, much less grow in size.

While this system was common across much of Western Europe, especially France, in Britain it was complicated by the fact that it was a social system overlaid on an older Saxon system after the Norman Conquest. The Normans brought with them a number of technological, social and military innovations, and among the most important were the mounted knight and sophisticated stone castles. Together, these innovations not only conquered the Saxons but eventually the Welsh, Scots and much of Ireland as well. [59]

After the initial conquests, when the Normans faced other Normans and French-speakers, the style of war changed. Commanders in these wars tended not to prefer open battles or elaborate sieges (despite their popularity in literature) but instead opted for wars of attrition, primarily fought by raiding parties sent out to devastate the agricultural production of enemies. Inevitably, the peasants suffered the most in these conflicts. This style of conflict was due to the fact that armored knights were expensive to maintain and difficult to train, as well as being difficult to defeat. A squadron of knights could only be defeated by a similar body, meaning that open warfare threatened the entire military superstructure of a region for a generation. [60] Moreover, castles were incredibly difficult to penetrate, so the

peasantry seemed an easier target for warfare.[61]

After the Norman Conquest, the Saxon nobility was largely deposed, which left a divide between Norman nobles on the one hand and Saxon peasants on the other. The Saxons lacked the technology to defeat the Normans, and their resistance against their new masters began to take the form of what would today be considered guerrilla warfare. Their goal was not necessarily to drive out the enemy but simply to plunder. Despite modern fantasies of Robin Hood raiding the castle of the Sheriff of Nottingham, this banditry took place outside of these strongholds and largely within the wild places, especially the Royal Forests. The forests were areas of protected wilderness reserved for Royal hunting parties, and within which poaching was a punishable offense. Thus, "Forest" was a legal term, marking not simply any stand of timber but one protected by the king's agents: the warders and rangers.

Sherwood Forest was first created in 958 AD by local nobility and was seized by the royal family after 1066. Kings had lodges within the Forest, and the ruins of King John's can still be seen there today. In the 13th century, the period in which most Robin Hood stories take place, Sherwood covered over 100,000 acres, and through the heart of it ran the "Great North Way," a road that ran from London to York. This was not unbroken forest but instead a mixed use area dotted with charcoal burners, monastic establishments (which Robin often deals with), and small communities. It was an ideal region for bandits living "outside the law." [62]



Royal Forests established by the 14th century



A view of Sherwood Forest

Archery features prominently in the stories of Robin Hood, mostly because the English longbow was a crucially important weapon in that era, even beyond the archery tournaments that the Nottingham nobility were so fond of too. The longbow has a deep tradition in England that dates back to the depths of prehistory, but it came to international prominence in the 1340s when the Hundred Years War began. By 1363, all Englishmen were ordered by law to practice archery on Sundays and holidays, which led to spectacular success at

the battles of Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt, where English commoner archers cut down the French noble knights, forever changing the balance of power in medieval warfare.^[63] Through these victories, the ideal of the English yeoman archer as a common but free man defending his king entered mythology. Combined with the Robin Hood tradition of poaching and banditry, it becomes apparent how stories of Robin Hood serve as a symbol of the strength of Saxon commoners to overcome their oppressors and reverse the balance of power, even if for only a moment.

It has been common to view the High Middle Ages as the "Age of Chivalry," and the golden age of the monastic scholasticism, but this is largely a view provided by several centuries of hindsight. It is true that the High Middle Ages were a period of relative prosperity compared to the Late Middle Ages, which witnessed the Black Death and horrific internecine wars that decimated the European population, but the survival of the Robin Hood legend paints a different picture. Unlike the tales of King Arthur or Charlemagne, which view this period from the perspective of the nobility, the Robin Hood stories are a precious survival of peasant tales. They paint an image of the common folk being ground under the heel of taxes (to the King) and tithes (to the Church), of official corruption, and of arbitrary and cruel punishments, especially for poaching on royal lands. Certainly, the time described was not one of harmony, but the internal strife that would open the arteries of Europe in the Late Middle Ages already devastated the countryside. In particular, Britain suffered during a period known as the "Anarchy," a civil war that ran from 1135-1153 and was vividly portrayed in Ken Follett's popular novel *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989). Out of this emerged widespread banditry amongst the lower classes, of which the Robin Hood stories are one manifestation, and royal agents (like the Sheriff) attempted to maintain order.

Outside of the King's personal dominions, the agent of his will was an official known as the "Sheriff." The Norman kings in the era of Richard, John and the predecessors appointed Sheriffs from amongst their closest allies to serve as able administrators of their more distant territories. These early sheriffs were more akin to viceroys and were given considerable autonomous power, but during the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, the role became more bureaucratized and given less to intimates and more to loyal bureaucrats. As the role shifted, Sheriffs were appointed to every county in the Kingdoms and were required to provide revenues to the Crown and manage property as stewards.^[64] The Sheriff of Nottingham was a real position, which even today still continues to exist as a ceremonial post. The setting for

the Robin Hood stories takes place over both periods of time, allowing for the Sheriff of Nottingham to be depicted both as a royal agent and as an inept and corrupt civil servant. Though he would be a more intimidating enemy as a royal ally, he would have been the scourge of outlaws either way.



Louis Rhead's illustration depicting the Sheriff of Nottingham

Chapter 2: In Search of a Historical Robin Hood

It's clear that Robin Hood served as an effective symbol for certain people during the High Middle Ages, but the most popular question that pops up when examining the history of Robin Hood was whether the famed villain ever actually lived. Like most folk legends that date back hundreds of years, there are some hints but no firm answers.

Most versions of the Robin Hood story today have his tale set during the reigns of Richard I (Richard the Lionheart), as well as his brother John, who served in Richard's stead during the Third Crusade and became king after his death. Richard reigned from 1189-1199, and John reigned from 1199-1216, putting the potential setting for the Robin Hood adventures at 24 years. Most of the Robin Hood stories are more specific, setting the adventures during Richard's captivity from 1192-1194, but by tracing the historical roots of the Robin Hood stories, it becomes clear almost immediately that these dates are a relatively recent addition to the story, and that tales of the rogue potentially predate the reign of Richard I and continue long after it.

The original Robin Hood stories were folktales that moved amongst the common people, branding him as an anti-hero who challenged the vested authority of King and Church and got away with it. He was not, however, the jolly swashbuckler that most people think of today; one modern writer likened him to a medieval "Godfather," a man who was not afraid of brutally effective violence but was governed by his own code of honor.^[65] This characterization comes from some of the earliest surviving depictions, such as the early ballads that have Much the Miller's Son murdering the page of a monk in order to protect their hiding place. That is clearly out of step with the depiction of Much the Miller's Son being one of the Merry Men, and hardly anything like the thigh-slapping jolly woodsman of the Errol Flynn films.^[66]

The question thus remains: was there a "real" Robin Hood that ultimately served as the foundation for the stories? This question is muddled by the fact that many later brigands adopted the title "Robin Hood" or "Little John" as criminal pseudonyms, the same way that mobsters take names like "Pretty Boy Floyd", "Ice Pick Willie", and "Mad Dog." The name serves both to hide their real identities and also to increase their notoriety. Further complicating the search for the original Robin is the fact that the nobility of medieval England would use the title "Robin Hood" to describe all sorts of miscreants, including one of England's most notorious criminals, Guy Fawkes.^[67] While Guy Fawkes himself has become a sort of anti-hero symbol over 400 years after his treasonous plot, he was hardly thought of that way

when the label “Robin Hood” was being bandied about to describe him in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot.

That said, there are a few tantalizing hints that an actual historical figure served as the basis for the Robin Hood legend. Scholars have found reference to a fugitive named William Robehod or William, son of Robert la Fevere, in 1261 and 1262, and this fugitive led a gang of outlaws. According to the records, however, the wealth that was stolen in this case belonged to Robehod himself; his property was seized in his absence. It is probable that William, son of Robert la Fevere’s name was changed by court clerks to “Robehod”, making this the earliest datable reference to a name that seems awfully similar to Robin Hood. Similarly, records from the 1260s-1300 make reference to several men named “Rabunhod” across England, as far north as York and as far south as Berkshire, which suggests that multiple outlaws were using similar monikers. It’s possible but unlikely that William, son of Robert la Fevere actually had the last name Robehod, and that he was so notorious that other outlaws mimicked his name. But if it is assumed that Robehod was not his actual name, this means that stories about a figure named “Robehod” were so prevalent by 1261 that the court clerks who deemed him “Robehod” in the records were aware of these stories and were likening William, son of Robert la Fevere to the “Robehod” figure.

Today, scholars think there’s an even more likely candidate for the Robin Hood legend, and this man existed at least a generation earlier, which makes it possible he set the stage for the people known as “Robehod” and “Rabunhod” from 1260-1300. There was a man named Robert Hod who apparently joined John’s failed 1193-4 coup against his brother Richard the Lionheart, and whose property was seized in 1225.^[68] Given the era in which Robert Hod lived, and the story of his life, it’s possible that Robert Hod was a well-known enough historical figure for outlaws and lawmen alike to reference. Robin Hood is often depicted as a supporter of Richard the Lionheart an an outlaw who harries King John and his corrupt officers, so the fact that Robert Hod fought for John seems out of step with the legend. However, most scholars pinpoint the notion that Robin Hood supported Richard the Lionheart as being a 16th century creation that does not match the earliest stories about Robin Hood, such as the 15th century ballads in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, which claim Robin Hood existed during the reign of King Edward.

One other contender that has gotten some traction in recent years is a man named Roger Godberd, who led a band of highwaymen during the 13th century. As per lore, Godberd was held by the Sheriff at Nottingham Castle, and he plundered the wealthy on the Great North

Road. His exact birth and death are not known, but he is believed to have lived between the 1230s and the 1290s. [69]

Some 15th century chroniclers make mention of Robin Hood in a way that suggests they were speaking of a historical figure. For example, Walter Bower wrote in the mid-15th century, "Then [c. 1266] arose the famous murderer, Robert Hood, as well as Little John, together with their accomplices from among the disinherited, whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both in tragedies and comedies, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing above all other ballads." Similarly, a monk wrote in the mid-15th century, "Around this time, according to popular opinion, a certain outlaw named Robin Hood, with his accomplices, infested Sherwood and other law-abiding areas of England with continuous robberies." But at the same time, Bower's story includes anecdotes that sound more like the typical Robin Hood tales; at one point, Robin Hood refuses to retreat until after he hears Mass, and Bower credits his subsequent victory over his enemies to his religious devotion.

In addition to the search for a historical figure, oral legends have also ensured that certain actual places have become associated with Robin Hood. For example, legend claims that Robin's grave exists in the ruined Priory of Kirklees and is dated to 1247. This spot is said to be where Robin, poisoned by the treachery of the Prioress, fired his arrow and asked Little John to "bury me where my arrow falls." Today there is a stone grave in Kirklees, a 19th century replacement of the lost original said to be Robin Hood's, that lies far from the ruined Priory and beyond the range of arrows of the time. Interestingly, it is exactly twice the distance of Robin's famous shot mentioned in the ballad *Robin Hood and the Guy of Gisborne*. [70]

It seems the tradition that associates Robin Hood with that grave dates back to about the 17th century, as referenced by Thomas Gale, Dean of York, who wrote:

"[Robin Hood's] death is stated by Ritson to have taken place on the 18th of November, 1247, about the 87th year of his age; but according to the following inscription found among the papers of the Dean of York...the death occurred a month later. In this inscription, which bears evidence of high antiquity, Robin Hood is described as Earl of Huntington – his claim to which title has been as hotly contested as any disputed peerage upon record.

‘Here underneath this little stone
Lies Robert Earl of Huntington

Never archer there as he so good
And people called him Robin Hood
Such outlaws as him and his men
Will England never see again”

However, as with Bower’s seemingly historical account of Robin Hood, Gale’s writing also suggests a familiarity with the literary tales of Robin Hood, and the notion that Robin Hood is more of a representative symbol than a historical figure. The suggestion that Robin Hood was actually the Earl of Huntingdon likely came from Anthony Munday’s plays around the end of the 16th century, which thus far are the earliest known references to Robin Hood being the Earl of Huntingdon.

There are a few other locations that also have a long-term association with Robin Hood, the best known of which are the Major Oak and Robin Hood's Well. The Major Oak is Britain's largest oak and sits at the heart of today's Sherwood Forest Park. Though it is debatable whether the tree is even old enough to have seen a historic Robin, it is forever etched into lore as his forest throne[71]. The well has a more modern stone pavilion built over it, but it has sat on the side of the Great North Road, where Robin is said to have done his plundering, for centuries. It is said that Robin and his band would drink from the waters, and that Robin married Marian at that site. [72]



The Major Oak



Robin Hood's Well

Recently, some neo-pagans and folklore enthusiasts have drawn connections between Robin Hood and the trickster fairy Robin Goodfellow, which one enthusiast lays out:

“Both had a penchant for giving travellers a hard time. Puck

was a shape-shifter, and Robin Hood a master of disguise. And Gillian Edwards notes that the Goodfellow in Robin Goodfellow's name could either mean a boon companion or thief... Since the Robin Goodfellow ballads appear later than the Robin Hood ones, it's possible that the faerie may have taken his name from the outlaw -- not the other way around.”[73]

Both Robin Goodfellow and Robin Hood appear in the English ballad tradition, are associated with the forest, and have a connection to Midsummer (Robin Goodfellow primarily through Shakespeare and Robin Hood through the medieval plays). There do seem to be important parallels; but it is important to note that Robin Hood's trickster personality is a recent innovation, so he does not actually share that with Goodfellow. In addition to the potential connection to Goodfellow, others have made even more tenuous connections between Robin Hood and old Celtic gods of the forest, especially the Green Man and Herne the Hunter. [74] Ultimately, any potential mythological roots for Robin Hood remain tantalizing but unreachable. While many find these interpretations convincing, academic scholars have yet to find enough connections to believe they warrant serious scholarship.

Chapter 3: The Literary Origins of Robin Hood

While the search for a historical figure and archaeological sites associated with Robin Hood continues, it is far easier to trace the literary origins of Robin Hood. Medieval ballads and plays are what made Robin Hood famous and are a rich source of folklore. In many ways, the literature provides as much historical context as the historical records, because folklore like this bears the imprint of the social context in which it was developed and performed. A number of early ballads about Robin Hood survived, including *Robin Hood and the Monk*, *Robin Hood and the Potter*, *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham*, *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*. These works date as far back as the Middle Ages themselves. [75]

The early ballads include examples of both serious and comic songs, and though he does make a generous loan in one of the ballads, none of them depict Robin "robbing from the rich and giving to the poor". While they are set in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire, these songs carried the Robin legend to the far ends of Britain, and naturally they served as a foundation for subsequent ballads and folk tales to be developed on top of them. As recently as the 19th century, British ballad-collectors were using the surviving ballads to establish dozens of new modern tales about Robin Hood themselves.

One of the most important early associations of Robin Hood, the one where he first became connected to Maid Marian, was in the medieval celebration of May Day. This ancient holiday takes place on the first of May and is a celebration of Spring. Its more tame manifestations, most notably the May Pole and Morris Dancing, were revived by nostalgic Victorians [76], but the medieval celebrations that featured Robin and Marian were far from tame. On the contrary, they were raucous, bawdy and unruly affairs, and some elements of this tradition survive in the outlying corners of Britain. One of the most famous is the apparently ancient masked dance of the "Obby Oss" in the Cornish village of Padstow, where male dancers swirl through the streets, attempt to capture women in their wide hoop skirts, and even enact masked judgment on disliked local figures. [77] Scholars have examined these festivals as an example of the "carnavalesque", a period of officially sanctioned transgression when the social order is inverted: up becomes down, beggar becomes king, man becomes pig, pig becomes man. [78]

In this context of social transgression, the stories of Robin Hood as a commoner who robs nobles were immensely popular, and the early

ballads were transformed into plays. It was here that the character of Maid Marian was introduced as a counterpart to Robin. It is also probable that this was where the association with green clothing appeared: Mayday celebrations often involve greenery and green clothes. Even the nobility sometimes got involved in the act; Henry VIII was said to have entered his Queen's chambers with 11 noblemen all dressed in green as Robin Hood and his outlaw band[79].



Douglas Fairbanks as Robin Hood and Enid Bennett as Maid Marian in the 1922 film *Robin Hood*

Robin is at the center of all of the tales, even the earliest ones, but the early tales do not actually tell the story of how he came to be an

outlaw, even though they do mark him as a "yeoman." An old term, "yeoman" refers to both a free farmer living on his own land and a free servant (or soldier) serving a lord. They were not serfs, peasants or bound laborers, but they were free men who still had to do physical labor, meaning that they were below the gentry.[80] Early Robin Hood was not unshakably connected to Sherwood either; a number of the early tales link him to Barnsdale Forest, located not in Nottinghamshire but further north in Yorkshire.

The Robin Hood of the earliest tales does not give to the poor, but the seeds were sown for future stories that incorporate that theme. In the longest of the early tales, *The Gest*, he loans money to the poor knight Sir Richard at the Lee and also lays out a code of conduct for his men, which demonstrates that Robin Hood and his followers were different than the brutal ruffians that travelers feared. However, the early tales of Robin Hood depict a remarkably malleable character. In one story he could be selfish or serious, and in the next he might be selfless or humorous. He is frequently insulting his friends and scornful of the Church, but he is devoted to the Virgin Mary. His actions towards Guy of Gisborne, including the mutilation of his corpse in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, reveal an early character that is often brutal and unlikeable, a far cry from the lovable rogue so common in late 19th and early 20th century tales.

In today's stories, Marian often plays second fiddle to Robin and is depicted like a Victorian lady pining away for her heroic, swashbuckling man. However, Marian actually appears to pre-date Robin by many years. She was the queen of the Mayday celebrations, and as a symbol of the New Year, she was a virgin. This is the origin of the title "Maid," which was not a female servant but a shortened version of "maiden". The word itself appears first in English in the late 12th century, the same period in which the Robin stories are typically set[81].

Marian does not appear in the oldest ballads, which do not have a romantic element and are instead focused on Robin's involvement in illegal escapades in the Greenwood or the town of Nottingham, usually with Little John. Marian definitely existed at that time, and plenty of people would have been familiar with her, but she was an independent piece of folklore connected to the Queen (or Lady) of May. When Robin was introduced to the Mayday celebrations, there was originally a choice between a "Robin" play and a "Marian" play; it was only later that the two were merged, and naturally Marian became Robin Hood's love interest.[82]

While Friar Tuck does not appear in the earliest stories, he is

undoubtedly one of the earliest characters and has taken a number of forms, of which the famous fat and lazy friar is only one (the depiction of Tuck as a fat and lazy friar has been dominant since Howard Pyle's 19th century book). Tuck first appears not in the ballads but in the Tudor May Day plays, in a way slightly before but similar to the fusion of Marian into the stories. It was only later that he moved over into the ballad tradition. In fact, it is possible he is connected to the "Friar" character in traditional Morris Dancing.

One clue that makes clear Friar Tuck's ill fit with the Robin Hood tales is the fact that friars did not exist in the era of Richard the Lionheart and his brother John. The term friar refers to a member of a mendicant order, meaning that neither the monk nor the monastic organization owned property, and that unlike cloistered orders who separated themselves from the world, the friars worked directly amongst the populace. Prominent mendicants included the Dominicans and Franciscans, but the first of these orders (the Dominicans) was only founded in the year of King John's death and did not arrive in England for over a decade. Nevertheless, although his specific order occasionally changes within the stories, Tuck is always a friar, unlike many characters in the tales who have had their backstories change. [\[83\]](#)



Louis Rhead's illustration of Friar Tuck carrying Robin Hood on his back

The "Merry Men" were not an identifiable group for centuries, but that does not mean Robin Hood was unaccompanied in the early ballads. Indeed, the early tales are centered around the relationships between Robin and his fellow outlaws, as opposed to more modern retellings that focus upon Robin's search for justice (for himself and others), his quest for the hand of Marian, or his defense of the legitimate king.

The earliest, longest-lasting and most important companion of Robin is Little John, whose name appeared not only in the ballads but was also adopted by historical thieves as a moniker like "Robin Hood" itself. Little John is, however, something of a cipher. He is known for his great size and strength, which serve as the basis for his ironic nickname, but little else. Any backstory before meeting Robin is a relatively new development, because the early ballads depict Robin and John originally being fast friends and criminal partners.



Louis Rhead's illustration of Robin Hood and Little John

The two other members of the criminal band from this period are Much (or Midge) the Miller's Son and Will Scarlet (or Stutley). These two characters are named and take actions within the storylines, but at no point are they truly fleshed out. The most readers learn about Much the Miller's Son is that he is the son of a miller and that he was outlawed for poaching the King's deer, an offense punishable by death. He kills a page in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, a scene that would never need to worry about making its way into a Disney retelling. Will Scarlet is also present in the early ballads and may be the same character as Will Stutley. He only gains a backstory and characteristic elements in the rather late ballad *Robin Hood and the Newly Arrived*, in which he is depicted as a wealthy young man dressed in red who Robin encounters, recruits (because he is Robin's nephew), and grants a new name to (presumably to disguise him).^[84] These two stories - Much hunting deer and Will dressed in red - have become the widely accepted versions of the tales. Other characters from the criminal band in the early ballads include David of Doncaster, Arthur a Bland and Gilbert Whitehand, but these individuals are simply named. They have no distinguishing marks and take no distinctive actions in the stories.



Louis Rhead's illustration of Will Scarlet

There are three villainous characters that appear in the earliest tales: the Sheriff of Nottingham, the Bishop of Hereford, and Guy of Gisbourne. The Sheriff represents corrupt secular power, the bishop

represents corrupt church power, and Guy is a brutal representative of the more traditional and typical outlaw.

Of course, Robin's greatest and most notorious enemy in the early ballads is the Sheriff of Nottingham. In fact, Prince John would only be tacked on as a villain much later when Robin came to be associated with loyalty to the rightful monarch, Richard the Lionheart, John's brother. While the events in the tales often take place outside of Nottingham, this is not necessarily an anachronism, because the full title for the position of Sheriff of Nottingham at the time was "High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and the Royal Forests," a position that existed from 1068-1568. The Sheriff, especially in the early tales, has no personal name and is frequently killed by Robin Hood. As the lack of a name suggests, he serves as a general foil for the protagonist and a representative of the corrupt system that Robin steals from, so he has no distinct personality. Only in *Robin and the Shryff of Notyngham* and *Robin and Guy of Gisborne* is the title Sheriff of Nottingham specifically named; in other tales he is referred to only as "the Sheriff."[\[85\]](#) It was only in later versions that he actually demonstrates personality traits, usually cowardice.

In the ballad *Robin Hood and the Bishop of Hereford*, Robin plunders the traveling Bishop of Hereford. The Bishop represents corrupt church officials in general, but there was a historical Bishop that he is based on. Hereford is a city in western England near the border with Wales and is the capital of Herefordshire. It was granted a town charter in 1189 by Richard the Lionheart as "Hereford in Wales"[\[86\]](#), but the place was much older than that and the seat of the Bishop goes back to 676 A.D.[\[87\]](#) During the era of the Robin Hood stories, it was obviously a place of some wealth, due not only to its recent recognition as a royal town but also due to the importance (and massive size) of the city's Hereford Castle, a bulwark in the wars against the Welsh which had been rebuilt after seeing considerable action in the Anarchy.[\[88\]](#) Thus, for the tale-tellers in Yorkshire and Nottingham of that period, the "Bishop of Hereford" was a suitably distant but presumably corrupt priest from a well-known and wealthy settlement.

Guy of Gisbourne, who is occasionally called "Sir Guy" in some of the stories, was originally a yeoman (like Robin) who the Sheriff of Nottingham charges with hunting Robin down. However, the earliest surviving tale, *Robin and the Guy of Gisborne*, is set in Yorkshire, outside the Sheriff's jurisdiction. This suggests that it is probable that there were parallel traditions of Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire tales that were eventually amalgamated together into one.[\[89\]](#) Guy is an intimidating figure who dresses in a full horse's hide, a completely

unusual outfit for the time, and he stalks Robin in the forest.

Robin and the Guy of Gisborne is a much darker Robin tale than readers are accustomed to today. In the tale, Little John has been kidnapped and is being held by the Sheriff and Guy. Eventually, Robin tricks Guy as to his identity, kills him, and cuts off his head. Disguised in Guy's robe, he disfigures Guy's face to make it unrecognizable and then comes into the Sheriff's camp, where he frees Little John and kills the Sheriff with an arrow through the heart.[\[90\]](#)

Chapter 4: Transformation into a Good and Noble Outlaw

As Robin Hood's tales and songs were retold in the 17th century, a curious thing happened: the outlaw who had always been a Saxon yeoman became ennobled. This was not only a literal ennoblement - he was said to have to be the descendent of an ancient Saxon house - but also a metaphorical one. In this era, Robin came to represent all the values that the gentry saw in itself: hospitality, generosity, courteousness, Christianity, and loyalty to the Crown.

The 17th century was the era of the Stuarts, but it came directly upon the heels of the Tudor reign in Britain, the dynasty of such famed rulers as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The captivation with Robin in the 17th century was a direct inheritance of the Tudors, who were fascinated with folklore that included not only Robin but also King Arthur. The Tudors went as far as tailoring the legend of King Arthur to bolster their own legitimacy; the fact that the Tudors depicted themselves not as Normans but Welsh may have made the ethnic strife implicit in the tales less subversive.

One major inheritance of the Tudor period was giving a name and a noble title to Robin, which was perhaps the most significant change to the character's backstory that has ever occurred. After the Tudor period, it was widely believed that Robin Hood was in fact Robert, Earl of Huntingdon, that he was the lost son of John, the last Earl, and that he lived from 1160-1247. Thus, Robin Hood transformed from a low-born freeman into the Earl of Huntingdon.

The Earldom of Huntingdon was created in 1065 and given to a Saxon family, which kept the title after the Norman Conquest. That family intermarried with the Royal House of Scotland, and it was the death of the Queen/Countess of Huntingdon, Maud, that precipitated the devastating civil war known as the Anarchy. The line became extinct in 1237 after the death of the last heir, and the title lapsed as a result, but it was revived under a different family during the reign of the Tudors.

As noted before, the association between Robin Hood and the Earl of Huntingdon was concretely made in two plays by Anthony Munday, a predecessor of Shakespeare. Those plays, *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* in 1598 and 1601 respectively, came during the twilight of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudors. Munday broke strongly from earlier popular works and gentrified his hero, making him the victim of courtly betrayal and making his primary concerns not thievery but high politics and justice.^[91] By the time William Stukeley

(1687-1765) published his monumental *Palaeographica Britannica* in 1747, he was able to fabricate a family tree for Robin as Robert Fitzooth, Earl of Huntingdon, and pass it off as legitimate history [92].

This material change in origin also meant that Robin had to be given a more lofty motivation than simply material gain. In addition to the claim that he was illegitimately dispossessed and driven to the forest by the politics of a corrupt court, this was also the time when the concept that Robin "robbed from the rich and gave to the poor" first emerged. In the old ballads, Robin Hood never gave away any of his wealth; the closest he came was lending money to Richard at the Lee on favorable terms. Obviously, a yeoman handing out favorable loans is a far cry from a nobleman riding through peasant villages and tossing coins everywhere for the masses to have. Further evidence that the transformation of Robin Hood was a product of the times is the fact that the idea of a nobleman stealing from the rich and giving to the poor would have been ludicrous to the English people during the High Middle Ages. It was quite likely that a peasant bearing a gemstone, ring or shirt obviously belonging to or meant for a nobleman would have been in terrible danger given the harsh court system of medieval England.

As strange as it may seem to modern readers, the invention of the "robbing the rich and giving to the poor" tale actually came from the rich themselves. After all, nobody imagines themselves as a villain, and even the lower gentry could suffer mightily at the hands of corrupt bureaucrats and churchmen. The fact that Robin often directs his rapacious attentions towards a bloated Catholic Church must also have rung true in the ears of the newly-Protestant nobility, many of whom had recently gained lands seized by Henry VIII from the monasteries during his break with the Catholic Church and his establishment of the Church of England. King Henry's theft from the Catholic Church was far greater than anything done by Robin. [93]

Even still, the 17th century provided a mixed picture regarding Robin Hood's generosity. In the ballad *The Noble Fisherman*, Robin gives away the value of a French ship he captures, including part of the value to a widow and part to found an alms-house, but in *Robin Hood and Queen Catherine*, the beneficiary of his aid is the Queen, and several tales speak of him robbing peddlers. [94]

In addition to a new backstory and a new motivation, the 17th century gave Robin Hood a new companion: the minstrel Alan-a-Dale. Alan-a-Dale's first surviving appearance is in the ballad "Robin Hood and Allen a Dale," where Robin helps rescue Alan's love from an arranged marriage with an older man. Robin stops the bishop and,

while wearing the bishop's robes, performs the marriage himself. Alan is a wandering minstrel who quickly becomes a fixture within Robin lore, even though he was only one of many characters introduced during this period. It is difficult to determine exactly why Alan stuck while others faded away; it's possible that a minstrel was an appealing addition for the real-life minstrels who sang Robin's praises, or perhaps having a tale teller served as a useful device for moving plotlines. Some recent retellings have even incorporated Alan as the narrator.[\[95\]](#)



Louis Rhead's illustration of Alan-a-Dale

Chapter 5: Robin Hood and the Modern Era

Perhaps the most important work in the Robin Hood genre over the last two centuries is Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, first published in 1820. [96] In the classic novel, Robin appears at Prince John's archery tournament wearing a "Lincoln green" outfit and goads the Prince into making a wager. Scott's Robin is a lover and master of disguises, courteous, generous and playful, taking as much pleasure in tricking his enemies as he does them. He is known not as a scoundrel but, as King Richard declares when Robin reveals his identity, "King of Outlaws, and Prince of good fellows!"

The respect is mutual, because Robin in this version is a true patriot who yearns throughout the story for the return of the true king. He is a patriot through-and-through, and when his men leap out in ambush they invariably shout "Saint George for Merry England." St. George is the patron saint of England and a picture of chivalric nobility who is typically depicted as a mounted and armored knight who battles and vanquishes evil in the form of a dragon. Merry England is the type of England that this Robin embodies: a backslapping, ale-drinking, song-singing place where men are men and women are largely absent. It's a concept that is crucial to understanding what Scott added to the Robin Hood story.



LE NOIR FAINEANT IN THE HERMIT'S CELL

Out of the recesses of a dark closet, into which this aperture gave admittance, the hermit brought a large pasty, baked in a pewter platter of unusual dimensions.—PAGE 171.

An illustration of Friar Tuck meeting with Richard the Lionheart, from *Ivanhoe*

Ivanhoe brought two crucial innovations to the Robin story. The first is that Scott changed Robin Hood's personality by reinventing him as

a merry rogue. While previous depictions of Robin Hood took comic forms and had Robin Hood possessing a sense of humor (like when he invites Sir Richard at the Lea to dinner and then robs payment from him), the idea of a jolly thief king holding court over his "merry" men from a great oak tree throne deep in the forest was Sir Walter Scott's innovation.

Robin's backstory also became more fixed at this point. He is named as a Saxon yeoman by the name of Robin of Locksley (or Loxley). The conflict between Norman and Saxon becomes explicit in this tale, which is also an important element in subsequent retellings. Moreover, since *Ivanhoe* is set during Richard's crusade and John's regency over the throne of England, the novel undoubtedly helped to cement Robin in that specific time period. Finally, Scott appears to have invented the story of Robin splitting his own arrow in the archery competition, a story which has since become a standard of Robin Hood lore. Scott describes the scene:

“So saying, and without showing the least anxiety to pause upon his aim, Locksley stept to the appointed station, and shot his arrow as carelessly in appearance as if he had not even looked at the mark. He was speaking almost at the instant that the shaft left the bowstring, yet it alighted in the target two inches nearer to the white spot which marked the centre than that of Hubert.”

After Hubert makes a better shot, Robin Hood returns for a second try:

“...And letting fly his arrow with a little more precaution than before, it lighted right upon that of his competitor, which it split to shivers. The people who stood around were so astonished at his wonderful dexterity, that they could not even give vent to their surprise in their usual clamour. ‘This must be the devil, and no man of flesh and blood,’ whispered the yeomen to each other; ‘such archery was never seen since a bow was first bent in Britain.’”

Another element of the Robin Hood legend that came from *Ivanhoe* took longer to be fully integrated in the public consciousness. This was the backstory of Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe himself. *Ivanhoe* was a Saxon knight (at a time when they were rare) who was deeply loyal to King Richard the Lionheart, whom he had served with in the Crusades. He is dispossessed from his land and titles and becomes not an outlaw but a knight-errant defending the honor of the rightful king. It would take a century, but eventually this backstory would become transposed from *Ivanhoe* (no longer a widely popular figure)

to Robin Hood himself when later tellers wanted to justify his revolt. Moreover, Sir Ivanhoe had - suitably for a knight in the imagined Age of Chivalry - an unattainable love interest in the form of Lady Rowena, his father's ward. Similar tales of Maid Marian, who is often depicted as the ward of either Prince John or the Sheriff of Nottingham, would later add further high-minded motivations for Robin.

It should be no surprise that *Ivanhoe*, the first novel to deal with Robin Hood, came at the beginning of a time in which novels themselves were first emerging as a serious genre. Novels became popular for a number of reasons. First they were a genre meant to be read by the growing audience of literate readers from the middle and lower classes, often as newspaper serials. Second, they were read in the vernacular languages, which helped to connect language to nationalism. Finally, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars (when *Ivanhoe* was written) and then in the era of industrial revolution that followed, there was massive interest throughout Europe in national folklore traditions and the protection and revival of the values of the rural regions.^[97] Sir Walter Scott's writings fit well within this time period and these currents. He was a prominent member of the Tory party, and *Ivanhoe* and his other writings (such as the novel *Rob Roy*) promoted the view of a noble, pre-modern Britain.

After *Ivanhoe* in 1820, many other Victorian British authors took up the story of Robin Hood. Their writings, which often worked off many of the ideas found in *Ivanhoe*, became instrumental in not only re-popularizing Robin Hood but also domesticating him to the point where he was primarily identified as a rope-swinging, swashbuckling, happy-go-lucky vigilante in green tights by the start of the 20th century.

One of the early Romantic poems was W.B. Keats' *Robin Hood. To a Friend*, written around 1818. In this rather short work, Keats mourns the passing of Robin's world. For instance he writes, "No, the bugle sounds no more, And the twanging bow no more; Silent is the ivory shrill, Past the heath and up the hill." It is not Robin Hood that he mourns per se but the golden age of fraternity, gallantry and merry fun. This, of course, echoes the sentiments expressed in *Ivanhoe*, released to wider audience two years later, where Robin Hood is the embodiment of light-hearted courage. However, as is often the case in Keats' work, *Robin Hood* is gripped with sadness. The ways of old are gone and will never return, while the modern world has become a dark age of modernity and industrialism. As Keats' poem puts it:

"Honour to the old bow-string!

Honour to the bugle-horn!
Honour to the woods unshorn!
Honour to the Lincoln green!
Honour to the archer keen!
Honour to tight little John,
And the horse he rode upon!
Honour to bold Robin Hood,
Sleeping in the underwood!
Honour to maid Marian,
And to all the Sherwood-clan!”

As the Victorian age evolved, other poets and writers picked up where Keats and Scott left off, including Howard Pyle’s important 1883 novel *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown in Nottinghamshire*. Pyle, an accomplished artist, wove together various ballads and tales to create a coherent narrative in a form appropriate to children. His work was immediately popular and cemented Robin Hood as a do-gooder who gave away his profits and fought for England. Pyle, an American, would do similar projects with King Arthur, Aladdin and Caribbean pirates, with his lush illustrations establishing the stereotypes of pirate dress and Arthurian clothes that people think of today.

Around the same time Pyle’s book was published, Francis James Child published a collection titled *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, which was released intermittently between 1882 and 1898. This collection, today called the Child Ballads, had 305 traditional songs, and 38 deal directly with Robin Hood. One additional ballad may be an early incarnation of the rogue (*Robyn and Gandeleyne*). The Child Ballads had an effect upon Robin Hood similar to that which the Grimm Brothers’ collection of fairy tales had on that genre. The work made the tales easily accessible to a popular audience, made them available for recounting to children, and also served as an easy touchstone work for scholars.

The collection, reworking and popularization of folktales were popular pursuits in 19th century Europe. In addition to the writings of Child and the Grimm Brothers, scholars who did similar projects included the *Kalevala* (1835-6) tales in Finnish by Elias Lönnrot, the *Romance of Tristan and Iseult* (1900) by Joseph Bédier in France and the *Mabinogion* by Lady Charlotte Guest in Welsh (1838-1849). In all

of these cases, folktales were collected and organized and in some cases (especially the *Kalevala* and *Tristan*) were given a more cohesive overarching narrative. This work was closely connected to the revival of nationalism throughout Europe at the time, as these tales were seen as embodiments of their tellers' national ethos and spirit. Similarly, by the end of the 19th century, the disparate Robin Hood tales were being fashioned into a single narrative which was increasingly aimed towards children.

Robin Hood was already popular with children at that point, but the legend had not been entirely infantilized at that point. There were still serious, adult works written about Robin Hood too. Perhaps the most prominent came from Lord Tennyson, who produced the play *The Foresters: Robin Hood and Maid Marian* in 1892 while he was the Poet Laureate of Britain.^[98] The play is set in Richard's England, and it follows the 16th century tradition by portraying Robin as the ousted Earl of Huntingdon.

The evolution of Robin Hood into the symbol of the “good outlaw” can be seen in the 19th century’s similar treatment of another thief. The Great North Road, where Robin Hood was said to have plundered and where Robin Hood's Well is located, was home to Britain's other great, legendary thief: Dick Turpin. Turpin was a highwayman romanticized as a solitary figure who sat on a great horse, brandished dual pistols and wore a tricorner hat, a greatcoat and either a black bandana or a domino mask over his face. Turpin was certainly a historic figure, living from about 1705-1739, when he was hung for horse theft, and he is useful for understanding Robin Hood because the two are remembered as the greatest thieves in British history and were romanticized in the songs of balladeers and poets in the 19th century. Both cut dashing, brave silhouettes, but unlike Robin Hood, Turpin was never transformed into an establishment figure. Turpin never fought for "Merry England," the King, or anything other than himself. Instead, he was still remembered as a dangerous man who seized what he wanted from the King's Road. In fact, 19th century Methodists in the west of England put up portraits of Turpin and John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) facing each other on their mantelpieces to remind them of the worst and best of humanity. Turpin is illustrative because the romanticization and memory of his story offer an example of how Robin Hood was likely remembered among the people of the High Middle Ages. Turpin's story is what Robin Hood's story very well might have been and/or remained had it not been adopted by the gentry and transformed into a patriotic tale of the defense of king, country and a fair maiden.^[99]



This 1860 painting by William Powell Frith adds a clearly romantic element to highway robbery.

The 20th century has been a rich period for the Robin Hood story, thanks to the invention of new forms of media like films, television, comic books and video games. While these stories certainly build upon the motifs and plots of earlier eras, they have also begun to move in new directions, including going back in time towards a grittier, more historically accurate portrayal. Even still, Robin Hood is usually depicted as being a noble on a quest for justice.

One of the most formative portrayals of Robin Hood in cinema was Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), directed by Michael Curtiz and William Keighley. Filmed in technicolor, it was the second-highest grossing film of the year. In that film, Robin Hood was a true swashbuckler who swung from trees and chandeliers, fought a dramatic swordfight with Guy of Gisborne considered by some to be one of the best cinematic swordfights of all time, and was generally courteous, dashing handsome and roguishly clever. [100] The Errol Flynn version of Robin Hood owed a great debt to Howard Pyle, whose imagery served as the basis for the costuming of the film and was copied by others afterwards, including Disney and Mel Brooks. It was also Pyle who established the tales in a form suitable for children, which the 1938 film continued.

The influence of Flynn can be felt on many subsequent depictions of Robin Hood, including Disney's animated version (1973) and the spoof

Robin Hood, Men in Tights (1993). Flynn's influence even made its way into the genre outside of Robin Hood specifically, as evidenced by non-Robin films like *The Princess Bride* (1987). The Disney version was remarkable in that it fused the role of Robin with the French trickster Reynard the Fox, literally making Robin a fox amongst other anthropomorphic animals.

However, there has also been a backlash against tights and swashbuckling, and *Men in Tights* can be seen as part of this, since it thoroughly mocks the genre. More recent cinematic versions of Robin Hood have become increasingly gritty and dark. For instance, Russell Crowe's *Robin Hood* (2010) attempts to create a realistic portrayal of what is essentially a guerrilla warrior. Sean Connery's *Robin and Marian* (1976) does not necessarily reject swashbuckling, but it does show Robin as an old man unable to swing from chandeliers.

Kevin Costner's blockbuster *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) was the biggest budget recreation of Robin Hood yet, and though it had mixed reviews from the critics, it was a success at the box office. *Prince of Thieves* was a turn towards the grittier, more realistic version of the story (no swinging from trees), and it also attempted historically accurate costuming, but the plot draws upon popular versions of the story from *Robin of Sherwood*, *Ivanhoe* and traditional ballads.

The one innovation in *Prince of Thieves* is the introduction of Azeem, a Muslim bound to serve Robin Hood after he saved Azeem's life in the Third Crusade. In the 19th century, there were some Muslim villains in versions of the Robin Hood tales, but a surprising innovation of the 20th century was a Muslim addition to the Merry Men. The first appearance was by a Muslim named Nasir, who was a servant of a villain defeated by Robin in the British television show *Robin of Sherwood* in the 1980s. He was originally intended to be a one-show character, but he was brought back due to his popularity. Nasir served as the basis for the *Prince of Thieves* character Azeem, as well as the character Achoo in *Men in Tights*, which spoofed the role. Similar characters have appeared in several other works.^[101] This type of character would be rare but not impossible to imagine in 13th century Europe, when the Moors held a great deal of the Iberian Peninsula. William Shakespeare saw no problem fitting a Moorish Othello into the lead role of his great play (albeit set in the Mediterranean, not England).

The addition of a Muslim indicates the extent to which the Robin stories continue to grow and morph over the passing of time. Robin continues to be adapted to new settings as well. One of the more

enduring retellings has come in the form of the *Green Arrow* comics. The Green Arrow is an archery-based superhero set in modern-day America who was created by DC comics in 1941 and originally had no Robin Hood connections. In the 1960s, he was re-written as a grittier character who had lost his fortune and fought for the poor. He now dresses in green and has an Errol Flynn-sequel blonde goatee. [\[102\]](#)

Chapter 6: The Eternal Attraction of Robin Hood

People continue to learn more about Robin Hood and the origins of the Robin Hood legend, but it's clear that he means different things to different people. At the heart of Robin Hood's enduring popularity with the English people is his connection to the concept of "British Liberty." For centuries, the English have maintained that their nation holds a special place amongst the peoples of the world as a bastion of freedom. The ideological roots of this belief lie in the idea that the original Saxon kingdoms that England was founded upon were based upon a particularly egalitarian (for the Dark Ages) view of politics. Kings were chosen, not born, and individual freemen had guaranteed rights. This became crystallized in the traditions of Common Law, trial by jury and, eventually, parliamentary democracy.

British Liberty is more than simply a piece of national narcissism, because it has had a direct impact upon British society over history. In the 18th century, early anti-slavery campaigners managed to win the freedom of all slaves in England because of an ancient belief that England was a land of free men and that "the *air of England* is too pure for any *slave to breathe*", implying that people became free in England once they took a breath.^[103] Early anti-slavery campaigners like Granville Sharpe were fascinated by the Saxon roots of English law and their implication on freedom.^[104] This was fundamentally different from the later, French-developed Enlightenment concept of Universal Rights; people like Sharpe viewed Saxon as fundamentally connected to the land of England or the state of being Englishmen. The American colonists presented their Declaration of Independence - which relies upon the language of universal rights - only after their earlier petitions, which were grounded in their rights as "Englishmen", were denied^[105].

Robin Hood becomes a salient story when considering the oppressors of the story - King John and his minions - as foreigners. Although Richard the Lionheart is remembered as one of England's most famous kings, he was a Frenchman who spent a vast majority of his time in France. King John became the villainous embodiment of the Normans from France who brought alien ideas of absolute monarchy with them to the islands. Robin Hood is always a Saxon (whether a commoner or a nobleman depends on the version of the story), and his retreat to the woods and struggle against the ruling classes becomes a defense of British Liberty. Even Robin Hood's use of the longbow is symbolic of his role as a defender of Saxon liberty. After the battles of the Hundred Years' War, when English common-born bowmen cut down French nobles on horseback, the longbow became a symbol of doughty

English freemen defending English Liberty from the tyrannical French.

Early modern Britain was a place where there were plenty of threats to the concept of British Liberty. The Normans brought with them a new level of centralization and state (especially Royal) power which had never been seen on the islands but which were increasingly common in Western Europe. These trends only increased under the Tudor dynasty, during which Henry VIII himself brought the Catholic Church to heel in England. Dissent was common across Britain, and the right to a jury trial became one of the great bulwarks for the dissenters, leading the Crown to establish the hated "Star Chamber," a system of secret royal courts begun in the late 13th century where defendants had few defenses.[\[106\]](#)

Viewed through that prism, Robin Hood's actions become an original and successful form of dissent. Robin Hood and his dissent were legitimized by placing it within the context of the reign of King John (1199-1216), a remarkably unpopular and tyrannical king whose taxation policies eventually led to the Revolt of the Barons and the King being forced to sign the Magna Carta, a charter that limited his ability to control the nobility and an important document for the codification of the restrictions on royal rule and the eventual emergence of parliamentary democracy. This limitation of royal excess was supported by the nobility - who would eventually rise up against John - and therefore further justified and legitimized Robin's banditry in the eyes of the English Establishment.

But there is another earlier version of Robin. Before he became Robin of Loxeley, a loyal but unfairly deposed noble forced to defend the rights of free Saxon men, he was a Saxon yeoman living in the forest and raiding the rich. He was an inversion of the dominant cultural norms defined by the nobility of the day. He lived in the forest, hunted game for his sustenance, and looted and plundered the powerful. In contrast, the manly ideal of the nobility, exemplified by Britain's other great folk hero, King Arthur, was a man who lived in a house or castles, either plowed the land and raised grain (or lived off of the labor of those who did), and respected the laws and customs of the day, especially the rigid social hierarchy. It should be no surprise then that while Robin Hood was a folk hero amongst the Saxon poor, the name was very generally used to describe villains and thieves by the nobility. And naturally, King Arthur and Robin Hood are two different sides of the coin.

It is within this cultural context that it is possible to fully understand Robin, both then and now. This is because Robin is not a set story but an occasionally contradictory tradition consisting of stories, songs,

plays, images, films and television programs. This constellation of characters, storylines and specific acts has always floated around the themes of justice, honor, corruption, and resistance to the established norms. While societies have changed over the centuries, these themes remain relevant in shifting ways, and it should be no surprise that generations of tale-tellers have selected differently from these themes or even added new ones. That helps ensure that the Robin Hood of the past and present will also make its way into the future and remain relevant.

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- [1] *The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur* by Thomas Green (2007). Accessed online at <http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm>. The Horse-Man Twins are a widespread myth amongst the ancient Indo-European peoples (*Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. by Rudolf Simek (2007). Angela Hall (Trans). D.S. Brewer Publishing: Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK)
- [2] Vortigern is most likely a real historic figure who has a foul historic reputation but served as a warlord in post-Roman Britain. He is today infamous for supposedly inviting the Saxons, led by Hengist and Horsa, to Britain. For more on this period, check Christopher Snyder's *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and Britons, AD 400-600* (1998).
- [3] Quoted in *Journey to Avalon: The Final Discovery of King Arthur* ebook by David Pykitt and Chris Barber, 1997
- [4] "King Arthur: Commentary," at Britannia.com accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/historians.html>
- [5] "Ambrosius Aurelianus" at Britannia.com, accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/biographies/ambros.html>
- [6] <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/GEOFHKB.HTM>
- [7] "Sidonius Apollinaris: Letter to Riothamus, King of the Britons, c. 470." Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/sidonius.html>
- [8] *Who's Who in Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England*. Fletcher, Richard (1989). Shephard-Walwyn. pp. 17–19.
- [9] "Tintagel Castle" by A.C. Thomas, in *Antiquity* (1988) 62:421-34 and "Tintagel, Cornwall: The 1990 excavations" in *Antiquity* by Christopher D. Morris, Jacqueling Nowakowski, and Charles Thomas (1990) 64: 843-9
- [10] "Tintagel and the Arthur Controversy" accessed online at http://www.storyline-features.co.uk/arthurian_tintagel/arthurian_tintagel.htm
- [11] "Gerard of Wales on the Finding of King Arthur's Tomb" accessed online at the Camelot Project at the University of Rochester. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/gerald.htm>
- [12] "An Archaeological Quest for the 'Real' King Arthur" accessed online at http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/student_orgs/arthurian_legend/england/arch/
- [13] *The Landscape of King Arthur* by Geoffrey Ashe (1987) New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
- [14] "Myrddin Wyllt: A Cymric Bard and Seer, also known as Mad/Wild Merlin, Merlinus Silvestris, Merlinus Caledonis, Lailoken, Laleocen, Llallawg, Llallogan): Madman, the Wild" accessed online at http://www.celt.net.org.uk/gods_m/myrddin_wyllt.html
- [15] In this case, "text" does not mean solely a written document but a wider definition which means any cultural performance or symbolic product. It could include not only written documents, but also works of art, rituals, musical performances, dances, public speeches, etc. This definition builds off of the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.
- [16] This story is commemorated even today in the Welsh flag, which bears a defiant red dragon. For more information, see <http://welshflag.org/>
- [17] *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, (1969), James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.

- [18] "Culture Hero" from the *Random House Dictionary*, 2013 edition
- [19] "Morgan La Fey: Celtic Origins" from the Camelot Project of the University of Rochester <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/morgmenu.htm#Celtic>
- [20] "The Lady of the Lake" <http://www.britannia.com/history/biographies/nimue.html>
- [21] "The Resurrection of Morgan le Fey: Fallen Woman to Triple Goddess" by Theresa Crater (2001), in the journal *Femspec* 3.1:12.
- [22] "A Bibliographic Guide to Welsh Arthurian Literature" Accessed online at http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/notes&queries/N&Q1_ArthLit.pdf
- [23] *Culhwch and Olwen. An edition and study of the oldest Arthurian tale* R. Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (eds), Cardiff, (1992), pp. xxviii-xxix
- [24] "Pre-Galfridian Characters" Accessed online at <http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/n&q/figures.htm>
- [25] "Pre-Galfridian Characters" Accessed online at <http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/n&q/figures.htm>
- [26] A translation of "Culwch ac Olwen" can be found here: <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/culhwch.html>; http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/notes&queries/N&Q1_ArthLit.pdf
- [27] "The Battle of Badon" accessed online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/badon/badnbibfrm.htm>
- [28] A full text of the *Annals* can be accessed here: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/annalescambriae.asp>
- [29] A text of Bedier's work can be accessed here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/b#a5429>
- [30] "Joseph of Arimathea" Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/biographies/joseph.html>
- [31] "St. Joseph of Arimathea, Ancestor of Kings?" Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/articles/josanc.html>
- [32] "The Chalice Well: Where Glastonbury's Grail Rests" Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/chalwell.html>
- [33] An extensive biography of Geoffrey can be found at the Camelot Project of the University of Rochester by Emily Rebekah Huber. The magazine *Britannia* also featured an [article about his life](#) by David Nash Ford.
- [34] Constantine was probably a real 6th century minor king who is mentioned by Gildas. Geoffrey elevates him to kingship, but the oral tradition in Cornwall took it a step further, claiming that he surrendered his throne and became a monk and, eventually, a saint. The Cornish parish of Constantine is dedicated to him. For more information see *The Saints of Cornwall* by Catherine Rachel John (1982). Published by Truran Publishers in Truro.
- [35] "Caerleon: Dark Age Capital of Wales?" by David Nash Ford. Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/caerleon.html>
- [36] "Geoffrey of Monmouth" at Caerleon.net, accessed online at <http://www.caerleon.net/history/geoffrey/>
- [37] *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its early vernacular versions.* J.S.P. Tatlock (1950). University of California Press. Berkeley.
- [38] "Arthur Biographies: Sir Thomas Malory" Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/history/biographies/malory.html>

- [39] It is important to note that 'rape' at this time included what we would consider consensual sex with a married woman by a man other than her husband. The repetition of the rape charge indicates that this is a strong possibility in Malory's case.
- [40] "Humphrey Stafford, 1st Duke of Buckingham" from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed online at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/82992/Humphrey-Stafford-1st-duke-of-Buckingham>
- [41] This is summarized from "Sir Thomas Malory" accessed online at <http://www.arthurian-legend.com/more-about/more-about-arthur-7.php>
- [42] *King Arthur's Round Table: An Archaeological Investigation* (2000) by Martin Biddle. Winchester: Winchester Excavations Committee.
- [43] For a full text of *Le Morte d' Arthur*, look here: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/mart/>
- [44] *Welsh Nationalism and Henry Tudor* by William Garmon Jones (1918) London : The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. Accessed online at <http://ia700302.us.archive.org/7/items/welshnationalism00joneuoft/welshnationalism00joneuoft.pdf>
- [45] "Notes on Middle English Romance" by Jonathan A. Glenn, accessed online at <http://faculty.uca.edu/jona/second/romannot.htm>
- [46] Other important figures in the Matter who are today not immediately connected with Arthur are King Lear and Old King Cole.
- [47] *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, by Johan Huizinga. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (trans.) (1996) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [48] Ever the chivalric man, Quixote cites the combined "Nine Worthies" as having done fewer fine deeds than he.
- [49] "Tudor Arthurianism and the Earl of Cumberland's Tournament Pageants" by Alan R. Young in *The Dalhousie Review* (1987) V 67, I 2/3 (Summer/Fall) pp 176-189
- [50] "Lady Charlotte (Elizabeth) Guest" Biography at the Camelot Project, accessed online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/auth/guestbio.htm>
- [51] The most famous tragic Romantic book is *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, by Goethe (1774), where readers follow the slow path of the main character towards suicide. Other examples include *Moby Dick* (1851), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862).
- [52] Today held by the Tate Museum of Art: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-william-waterhouse-583>
- [53] Today held by the Bridgeman Art Museum: <http://www.bridgemanart.com/asset/33297/Collier-John-1850-1934/Queen-Guinevere%27s-Maying-oil-on-canvas>
- [54] Viewable at the Leicester Galleries: <http://www.leicestergalleries.com/19th-20th-century-paintings/d/four-queens-find-lancelot-sleeping/12777>
- [55] Viewable at the Pre-Raphaelite Art Blog: <http://preraphaelitepaintings.blogspot.com/2011/11/oxford-union-murals.html>
- [56] *Reinventing King Arthur: the Arthurian legends in Victorian culture* by Bryden, Inga, (2005). London: Ashgate Publishers Ltd
- [57] A minor figure, the Fisher King is the last guardian of the Grail.

He is the king of an empty wasteland of ruins, infertile and the last of his line. The character has echoes in a number of modern works, including the last Grail Knight in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

[58] A translation of the poem can be found at the Gutenberg Project: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9842>

[59] Not to mention that it was effective far beyond Britain: the Normans also eventually conquered Sicily, southern Italy (including Naples, the North African coast in today's Tunisia and Libya, the island of Cyprus, small sections of the Byzantine Empire and the city of Antioch in modern Turkey.

[60] This balance would be changed during the Hundred Years War by the introduction of the longbow by the English, who used it to great effectiveness against armored knights and then by artillery by the French, who used it to destroy English fortifications.

[61] *Medieval Life and the Hundred Years War* by Albert A. Nofi and James F. Dunnigan (1994), accessed online at http://www.hyw.com/books/history/1_Help_C.htm

[62] "The History of Sherwood Forest" on the Nottinghamshire County Council Webpage, accessed online at <http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/enjoying/countryside/countryparks/sherwood/>

[63] "The History of England: The Longbow", accessed online at: <http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/The-Longbow/>

[64] "The Decline of the Curial Sheriff in England, 1194-1258" in *The Reign of Henry III* by D.A. Carpenter (1996). Continuum Publishing Group

[65] "Book Review and Giveaway - 'Outlaw' by Angus Donald" (2011) accessed online at <http://faithljustice.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/review-outlaw/>

[66] "Robin Hood and Historical Context" by Dr. Mike Ibeji (2011) http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/robin_01.shtml

[67] "The Real Robin Hood" accessed online at <http://newhistories.group.shef.ac.uk/wordpress/wordpress/?p=4107>

[68] Ibeji (2011)

[69] "Is this the grave of Robin Hood? Historians claims farmer buried in an unmarked tomb is the outlaw behind the legend." by Chris Parsons, 2 April 2011 in *The Daily Mail Online*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1372334/Has-mystery-Robin-Hoods-identity-finally-solved-Historians-claim-farmer-led-band-highwaymen.html>

[70] "Bury Me Where My Arrow Falls... : A Reconstruction of Robin Hood's Last Arrow" by Richard Rutherford-Moore (2003), published by the BBC Nottingham, accessed online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/features/2003/10/bury_me_where_my_arrow_falls_full.shtml

[71] "Ten Things You Never Knew About the Major Oak" at Nottingham County Council Sense of Place webpage, accessed online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/sense_of_place/facts/major_oak.shtml.

[72] "Robin Hood's Well" on the Britannia Online Magazine. Accessed online at <http://britannia.com/tours/rhood/rhwella1.html>

[73] "Puck through the ages" accessed online at <http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>

[74] For example, visit: "Merry Robin: The Native British Tricksters" accessed online at: http://www.mythicjourneys.org/newsletter_oct06_matthews.html

- [75] For copies of the text of these ballads, visit the Gutenberg Project: "Ballads of Robin Hood and Maid Marian" from the Gutenberg Project, accessed online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28744/28744-h/28744-h.htm>
- [76] "History of the May Pole" at Tradamis - Traditional Dance and Music in Schools. Accessed online at <http://www.tradamis.org/Maypole%20History.htm>
- [77] "TV Chef Row Boils Over in Padstow." by Richard Savill (2007) in the *Daily Telegraph*.
- [78] *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* by Peter Stallybrass and Allong White (1986). Routledge Publishers.
- [79] "Plays and May Festivities" accessed online at <http://www.robinhoodlegend.com/plays-festivities/>
- [80] "Yeoman" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed online at: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/652994/yeoman>
- [81] "Maid" on Dictionary.com, accessed online at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/maid>
- [82] *Maid Marian: A Robin Hood Book* by Thomas Love Peacock and Richard Sarnett. Kindle Book published in 2012.
- [83] "Friar Tuck" at the Robin Hood Project of the University of Rochester, by Valerie B. Johnson, accessed online at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/rh/ftchar.htm>
- [84] This was the Child Ballad #128 and a full text can be found here: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/ch128.htm>
- [85] "The Sheriff of Nottingham" by Valerie B. Johnson (2011) accessed online at the homepage of the University of Rochester Robin Hood Project: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/rh/sheriffchar.htm>
- [86] "The Royal Charters of the City of Hereford" on the Hereford City Heritage homepage, accessed online at <http://herefordcityheritage.info/html/charters.htm>
- [87] "The Ancient Diocese of Hereford" on the Catholic Encyclopedia, accessed online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07255a.htm>
- [88] "Herefordshire Through Time: Hereford Castle" accessed online at <http://htt.herefordshire.gov.uk/1172.aspx>
- [89] "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne: An Introduction" accessed online at the homepage of the University of Rochester: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/guyint.htm>
- [90] Text of the original ballad *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* can be found here: <http://www.bartleby.com/243/116.html>
- [91] "Introduction to the Munday Plays" by Russell Peck, accessed at the Rochester University Robin Hood Project website: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/dowdeint.htm>. For a complete version of *The Downfall* visit: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/down.htm> and excerpts from *Death* can be found at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/death.htm>.
- [92] "Robin Hood" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed online at <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/505662/Robin-Hood>
- [93] "The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood" (1960) by J.C. Holt, in the journal *Past and Present*. No 18, pp 89-110
- [94] *Ibid*, p 92

- [95] The text of, and commentary on, the ballad appears here: <http://www.boldoutlaw.com/rhbal/bal138.html>
- [96] A free digital copy of Scott's work can be found at the Gutenberg Project: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/82>
- [97] *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson (1983). *The Dialogic Imagination* by Mikhail Bakhtin (1975). *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle Class Life* by Jonas Frykman (1987).
- [98] The text of the play can be found on the website of the University of Rochester: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/rh/forest.htm>
- [99] "The Real Dick Turpin" by Peter Rose in the magazine *British Heritage* February 1998. Accessed online at <http://www.britannia.com/BritHeritage/turpin.html>
- [100] For example: <http://colonyofcommodus.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/best-movie-swordfight-of-all-time/>
- [101] "Robin Hood and the Muslim Merry Man" by Muhammed Abdeloteleb (2005), accessed online at: <http://www.onislam.net/english/culture-and-entertainment/movies/436941.html>
- [102] "Robin Hood and Green Arrow: Outlaw Bowmen in the Modern Urban Landscape" by Sarah Beach in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression and Justice* (2000). Thomas G. Hahn (ed). Boydell and Brewer Publishers.
- [103] More information can be found at: the Anti-Slavery Society's "Slavery In England" page: <http://www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com/huk-slavery.htm>. A similar quote, and very typical by the Abolitionist William Cowper reads: "Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs Receive our air, that moment they are free; They touch our country, and their shackles fall."
- [104] *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* by Simon Schama (2009). Vintage Books.
- [105] "'Rights of Englishmen' Since 1776: Some Anglo-American Notes" by William F. Swindler (1976). In the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* V 124, N 5.
- [106] For information on dissent and the role of the jury trial, please consult: *The Making of the English Working Class* by E.P. Thompson (1966). Vintage Books. For information on the Star Chamber, please examine the British National Archives' website on the topic: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/star-chamber.htm>